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THE STORY OF

MAN CITY

THE REMARKABLE RISE OF A NEW FOOTBALLING POWERHOUSE

INSIDE THE STORY OF THEIR TREBLE TRIUMPH

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THE STORY OF

MAN CITY

Manchester City's journey from local church team to global powerhouse has been a remarkable one filled with as many lows as there have been highs. The Story of Man City celebrates the club's fascinating history, from their first trophy to their lower league struggles, from the Joe Mercer years to their stunning treble win and an unprecedented fourth Premier League title in a row. Discover the 50 greatest players to pull on the City shirt, the managers who have shaped the club and the moments that will live long in supporters' memories. You'll also find exclusive interviews from the FourFourTwo archives with the likes of Raheem Sterling, Phil Foden and Vincent Kompany, as well as fascinating features on how Pep became the most innovative coach in Europe and Sergio Agüero's journey from the slums of Buenos Aires to becoming one of the best foreign players to ever grace the English game. Enjoy!







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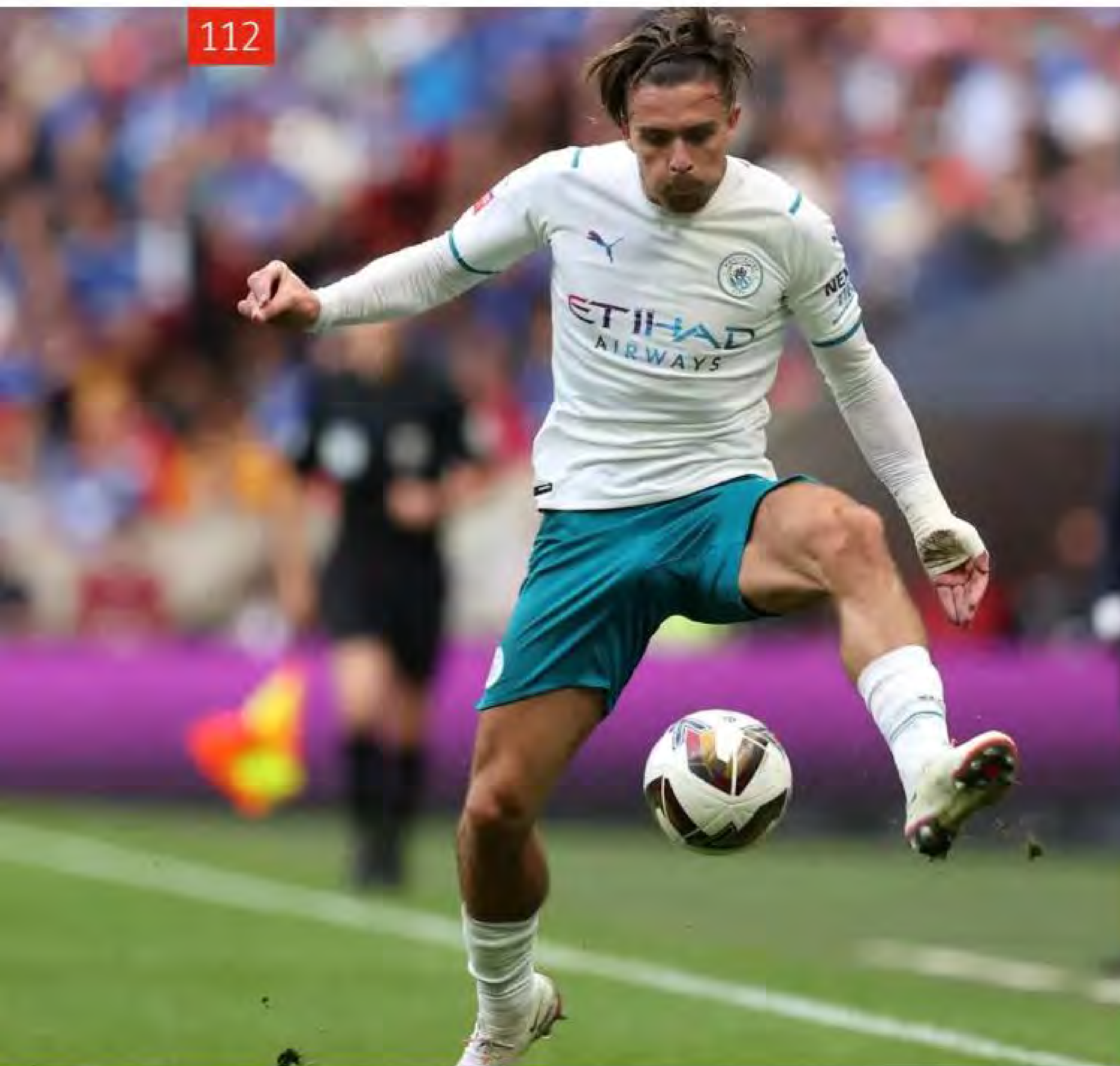


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BRIEF HISTORY OF MANCHESTER CITY



Images Gary James

The story of Manchester City, from its birth as a club to represent Manchester, through to the glories of the Pep Guardiola era

Words Gary James

From their birth as a church team, Manchester City have enjoyed a remarkable history. Before World War I, they established themselves as Manchester's first trophy winners, and became one of the most popular clubs in the country. Record-breaking attendances and major successes followed in the 1930s, while the late 1960s and '70s saw the Blues win European and domestic honours. However, mismanagement in the 1980s and '90s led to significant struggles, causing the Blues to lose pace with many of their traditional rivals.

Everything changed again in 2008 when a takeover by Sheikh Mansour from Abu Dhabi led to significant investment in the club. A glorious period has followed and, under manager Pep Guardiola, City have become an entertaining, record-breaking and dominant force. The last decade has seen more silverware than ever before, and with significant investment in facilities and youth development, it seems likely that Manchester's Blues will remain a dominant force for many years to come.

Here's an overview of the highs and lows of the club's 140-year development, starting with life as a church team in the 19th century.

IN THE BEGINNING

The young men of the St Mark's parish in the West Gorton district of east Manchester established various sports teams in the 1870s, with their football club appearing in its earliest known game in November 1880.

Over the following years, the club changed its name frequently, before in 1887 taking on a more professional tone. It became Ardwick AFC, chose a royal blue and white striped kit, and established its first significant home – the Hyde Road ground. This remained the club's home until 1923, regularly housing capacity crowds of 40,000.

"MANCHESTER CITY WAS BORN, AND VOTED INTO THE SECOND DIVISION IN 1894"

Below
Over 1 million took to the streets when captain Sam Cowan, flanked by Eric Brook and Matt Busby, toured with the FA Cup in 1934

Keystone-France via Getty

After adapting their colours to pale blue and white, Ardwick enjoyed local success in the Manchester Cup, before joining the Football League's newly created Second Division in 1892. A couple of difficult seasons followed, but the arrival of a visionary secretary-manager, Joshua Parlby, was the catalyst for a major leap forward.

Parlby became the club's driving force, and set about creating a club to represent the whole of Manchester, not simply a district. Manchester City were born, and voted into the Second Division as a replacement for Ardwick in 1894. The Blues also signed Welshman Billy Meredith, who in City blue, was to become one of the game's biggest stars and a legend of the game.

In 1899, City became the first team to gain automatic promotion to the First Division. Previously, a series of games, like modern day play-offs, had determined relegation and promotion for the top flight.

MANCHESTER'S FIRST SUCCESS

One of Celtic's founders, Tom Maley, was appointed manager in 1902. Two years later, with Meredith as captain, Maley guided City to their first national domestic honour, the FA Cup. The Blues were also league



runners-up. It was a phenomenal time, and the city celebrated like never before. That success has been recorded as the first major influence in establishing Manchester as a footballing city.

City came close to the title the following season too, but a controversial encounter at Aston Villa led to an investigation that ultimately found City guilty of paying players above the maximum wage allowed. Northern newspapers explained to their readers that almost every football club without exception was guilty of doing the same, but that City hadn't been as adept at hiding its practices as others.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the situation, City were punished like no other club before. Almost the entire first team squad, the manager and several directors were fined and banned. City fans encouraged several of the banned players to sign for the then poor relations, Manchester United, as they felt it would be better for Manchester. This included Meredith and another popular player, Sandy Turnbull, who both helped United find their first trophy successes.

Although City finished third in the 1907-08 season, several years of struggle followed as the club tried to build a new team. Despite these problems, the Blues remained Manchester's best-supported club, and in 1911, Hyde Road housed the league's highest average attendance. City fans may want to brag that Manchester's Blues achieved this 46 years before the Reds! City achieved the feat again in 1914-15, and at various other times in the 1920s.

By this time, Hyde Road was limiting the club's growth, with thousands locked out at almost every league game. City had been looking to move since the late 1890s, but in 1922 they finally were able to announce plans for an enormous new stadium in the Moss Side area of the city.



Images Getty Images

Above
Manager Joe Mercer celebrates winning the League with fans at Newcastle on 11 May 1968



Hulton Archive via Getty

Left
Bert Trautmann dives at the feet of Birmingham's Peter Murphy in the 1956 FA Cup final

RECORD-BREAKING BLUES

Maine Road opened in 1923, and in March 1924 played host to a crowd of 76,166 – which was at the time a record for any game on a club ground and any game outside of the FA Cup final on English soil. It remained the record until 1934, when City once again established a new national record after 84,569 watched them defeat Stoke 1-0 in an FA Cup quarter-final.

The popularity of City during the 1920s and '30s was remarkable. In 1928, as a Second Division club, they averaged 37,468 – the best in the entire league – and were the top flight's best supported club again in 1925-26 and 1928-29.

In terms of success, the Blues reached the FA Cup final in 1926, but became the first team to appear in the final and be relegated in the same season. Bizarrely, City had dismissed their manager during November that season, and the club's directors decided not to appoint a new manager until almost the season's end!

City's highest league position during the 1920s was second in 1920-21, and then in the 1930s the club's large support experienced trophy success again. This was a golden era for the club, who appeared in the 1933 FA Cup final and won the Cup in 1934. The homecoming parade that welcomed the Blues home was attended by 1 million people, according to contemporary ▸



reports and film footage. Manchester was packed like never before and, despite tremendous hardship in the city, the popularity of football had never been higher.

In February 1935, City established a record league crowd of 79,491 for the visit of Arsenal, meaning that for a time, City held both the league record and the record on a club ground.

With star players like goalkeeper Frank Swift and strikers Eric Brook, Fred Tilson and Peter Doherty, the league title arrived in 1936-37, with the key game of the final run-in coming in April 1937 when 74,918 witnessed a 2-0 victory over title rivals Arsenal.

TACTICAL PLANS & TRAUTMANN

After a shock relegation the year after winning the league, the Blues were a Second Division club when football was suspended due to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. When the league resumed, City were promoted as champions in the first post-war season. Demonstrating that they remained a popular club, one game that season attracted 69,463 – a record for the Second Division at the time.

Tactical genius and former player Les McDowall was appointed manager in 1950. He was the Guardiola of his day, and in 1954 he developed a deep-lying centre forward tactic that became known as the 'Revie Plan' after the club's number nine, Don Revie. The tactic baffled many opponents, and McDowall's men reached successive FA Cup finals. In 1955 they were unlucky to go down to ten men after only 19 minutes when Jimmy Meadows tore his cruciate ligaments. Despite a brave effort, City were defeated 3-1 by Newcastle (winning their last major domestic trophy to date).

The following year, injury struck again. This time though, City defeated Birmingham City 3-1 in an FA Cup final that has gone down in history as the Trautmann final for the exploits of German 'keeper Bert Trautmann. A former prisoner of war and Nazi paratrooper, he had joined City in 1949, and become a major footballing folk hero. In the 1956 final he got down to make a brilliant save, but the collision saw the knee of Birmingham's Peter Murphy hit Trautmann's neck with force. The 'keeper was in agony but, knowing the problems going down to ten men had caused the year previous, he vowed to stay on the pitch.

Clearly wincing and in pain, Trautmann bravely played on, even making another dramatic save that may well have damaged his neck further. In total he played on for about 15 minutes before the full time whistle was blown. It was later discovered that he had broken his neck.

Above 1970 squad photo with the European Cup Winners' Cup and League Cup

THE MERCER YEARS

Despite some great moments, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw City struggle. In 1963 they were relegated, and they reached their lowest position of all time (up to that point) in 1965. The club needed new direction, and that summer the board took the bold decision of appointing Joe Mercer. A hugely successful footballer with Everton and Arsenal, he had found trophy success as Aston Villa's manager, winning the League Cup, but Villa had dismissed him while he was recovering from a stroke in 1964.

Mercer was still recovering when he became City's boss, but he relished the challenge of resurrecting the club. He brought in exciting winger Mike Summerbee and appointed Malcolm Allison as assistant manager. Colin Bell was signed from Bury, and the Blues moved forward. The Division Two championship was won in Mercer's first season, and with brilliant coaching initiatives from Allison, City became an exciting and entertaining team.

Francis Lee was signed in October 1967 – Mercer regarded him as the final piece in the jigsaw he was assembling – and over the next three seasons the Blues won the Division One title (1968), the FA Cup (1969), the League Cup and their first European trophy – the European Cup Winners' Cup (both 1970). They defeated Poland's Gornik

"THE MERCER YEARS RE-ESTABLISHED CITY AS A POWER AFTER THE STRUGGLES OF THE EARLY 1960S"

Zabrze 2-1 in the final, played in Vienna, and the following season they reached the semi-final of the competition again, losing to eventual winners Chelsea. The Cup Winners' Cup was perceived as Europe's second most important competition, ahead in terms of significance of the Fairs/UEFA Cup.

The Mercer years re-established City as a major power after the struggles of the early 1960s, but in November 1970, only six months after achieving the League Cup and Cup Winners' Cup double, a takeover of the club was launched by local businessmen. Elderly chairman Albert Alexander, whose family had been a leading influence in the club since 1894, suddenly found himself under attack from those hoping to wrestle control their way.

Mercer and Allison were thrust on opposing sides, and as power shifted towards the new directors, Allison became team manager. Mercer inevitably left the club in 1972, shortly after City had missed out on winning the league by a point. It was a sad end to a glorious era for the club.

SEVENTIES GLAMOUR

Allison resigned in March 1973. His successor, former 1950s star Johnny Hart, became ill, and only lasted six months before new chairman Peter Swales appointed Ron Saunders in October. Swales claimed Saunders would be a success, and if he wasn't then the chairman would step down. The following April, Swales sacked Saunders, but the chairman was to remain in his post for the following 20 years – much to the anger of City fans, who would demonstrate against him frequently from the end of the 1970s until the 1993-94 season.

Saunders had taken City to the 1974 League Cup final, where they lost to Wolves. His successor, Tony Book, a great captain for the club during Mercer's reign, took the club one stage further, and won the same competition in 1976 when Newcastle were defeated 2-1. City's opener came from the PFA's Young Player of the Year, Peter Barnes – heralded during this time like Phil Foden is today – and their second came from a brilliant overhead kick by Dennis Tueart.

It was a wonderful period for the Blues, and in 1976-77 they missed winning the title by just a point to Liverpool. They were also regular competitors in Europe, reaching the UEFA Cup quarter-final in 1978-79 after defeating AC Milan 5-2 on aggregate.

With a team packed full of internationals such as Brian Kidd, Willie Donachie, Asa Hartford, Dave Watson, Mick Channon, Peter Barnes, Joe Corrigan and former Polish World Cup star Kaziu Deyna, the team seemed destined for further success. Unfortunately, a couple of directors (the same ones who had been part of the 1970 takeover) felt the club was still not achieving ▸



Below
Stuart Pearce lifts the First Division Championship Trophy after City beat Portsmouth 3-1 at Maine Road on 21 April 2002

Alex Livesey via Getty

WE'RE NOT REALLY HERE

The history of Maine Road

Built in 1923, Maine Road was the much-loved City home for 80 years. At its peak it was capable of holding 85,000, and was regarded at the time as the best club ground in the country. Many attendance records were set there, and it also housed many landmark moments not just for City, but for English football.

In 1949, it was selected ahead of Wembley to host England's first-ever home World Cup qualifier, and seven years later it staged the first European Cup game in England. City offered Manchester United the use of the stadium, as Old Trafford lacked floodlights, and the Reds' record home European attendance of 75,598 was set there. City also offered United use of the stadium from 1941 to 1949 following the bombing of Old Trafford, and a Football League record crowd of 83,260 was set during this time.

For much of its existence, the huge Kippax terracing was the spiritual home of City's most vocal fans. At its peak, over 35,000 could be housed there, and on its final day in 1994 it was the largest terraced stand in England, with a capacity slightly larger than Anfield's Kop.

Maine Road regularly housed FA Cup semi-finals, internationals and similar high-profile games. Its facilities improved decade after decade, but then, during the Swales years, investment in the ground was reduced and, despite remaining a much-loved venue, developments were piecemeal. When in 1993 a new stand was opened at the Platt Lane end, its capacity was less than half of the seated stand it replaced. The potential for Maine Road to house crowds over 40,000 was gone forever.

Despite the building of a new 10,000 seated Kippax Stand in 1995, Maine Road's capacity was only around 30,000. This increased with temporary seated stands filling almost every spare space in an attempt to satisfy demand during the difficult days of the late 1990s – one was dubbed the Gene Kelly, as the fans sat there were used to singing in the rain – but the need for a larger venue was clear.

The club left Maine Road at the end of an emotional 2002-03 season. City's last first team goalscorer there was Marc-Vivien Foé, who netted in the Blues' victory against Sunderland. His number (23) was retired by the club following his death that summer.



John Chillingworth via Getty



Michael Regan via Getty

NOISY NEIGHBOURS

The history of City's rivalry with the red half of Manchester

Assumptions that until recent years Manchester's Blues have always played second fiddle to United are wrong. The history of football in Manchester shows that both teams have enjoyed periods of dominance, but until the last decade, the most recent years had seen United as the dominant club.

The history of the two clubs goes back to the 19th century. In fact, City's predecessor, Saint Mark's, played its earliest known game exactly a week before that of Newton Heath (United's previous incarnation) in November 1880. The Blues were also the first of the two clubs to find major success (1904 FA Cup). In 1906, following United's first promotion, the first top-flight Manchester derby saw City win 3-0.

Before 1945, City was the better supported and more glamorous club. In fact, United's support dropped to an average of 11,685 at the start of the 1930s, while City's was almost three times higher. Things changed, however, when former City star Matt Busby transformed United's fortunes between the !940s and '60s. The Reds became a global name.

The late 1960s saw City in the ascendency while United declined, and in the 1970s the Blues won more major trophies than the Reds, who also experienced a season in the second tier.

The balance of power switched again during the 1980s, and then, as City were enduring their least successful period, Alex Ferguson guided United to unprecedented success. It looked as if City would never regain top spot locally, but then significant investment followed in 2008 and, in terms of modern success, City have become the dominant Manchester club once again.

The move by Carlos Tevez across Manchester in 2009 was a major turning point in the latest switch. At the time it prompted Ferguson to describe City as "noisy neighbours", but over the following three seasons, Tevez helped his new club eclipse United.

Two significant Manchester derbies have proved crucial in City's modern development: the 2011 FA Cup semi-final, which ended in a 1-0 victory thanks to a goal from Yaya Touré, and the April 2012 derby, where City captain Vincent Kompany rose up to head the only goal of the game. That goal swung the advantage City's way in the 2012 title race, and those two victories helped set the tone for all that has followed. The noisy neighbours seem destined to get louder and louder.

Above
Captain Vincent Kompany celebrates scoring the goal that swung the title race City's way on 30 April 2012

enough and they persuaded chairman Swales to bring back Malcolm Allison as coach. Swales later admitted that this was the biggest mistake of his career.

Allison arrived in January 1979, and immediately upset several star players. Some were told that they had no future at the club, and in March, City's UEFA Cup dream was shattered when Allison's tactical changes led to a 4-2 aggregate defeat to Borussia Mönchengladbach. The following summer, a whole host of international players – and heroes to City's large support – were shipped out, while Allison spent large amounts on inferior replacements.

FALLEN GIANT

After a series of high-profile expensive purchases and disastrous results, Allison and Book were dismissed in October 1980. New manager John Bond claimed that he found a squad lacking in confidence and confused by some of Allison's tactical innovations. Bond brought in three players – Tommy Hutchison, Bobby McDonald and Gerry Gow – and the club moved up the league and progressed to the FA Cup final. They also reached the League Cup semi-final, losing in controversial circumstances as a result of an incorrectly disallowed goal against Liverpool.

The 1981 FA Cup final saw Hutchison give City a 1-0 lead over Tottenham, but disappointingly he also diverted a free kick into his own net, and the 100th final ended 1-1. The following Thursday, the Wembley replay saw a stunning goal from City's Steve MacKenzie and a penalty netted by Kevin Reeves, but it wasn't enough, and they lost a thrilling replay 3-2. Spurs' Ricky Villa famously netted via a mazy run that seemed to pass defender after defender.

The 1981 final was anticipated to be the first of many that decade, but City had been mismanaged under Swales, and were now in significant debt. A shock relegation came in 1983. City had not been in the bottom three all season, and simply needed to draw with Luton on the final day to stay up. With four minutes left to play, Luton's Raddy Antic netted the only goal that ensured their survival and City's relegation.

LOYAL SUPPORTERS

With City deep in debt and in Division Two, the club's status as a giant of the game seemed at an end. The fans were still loyal – from 1975 until relegation in 1983, they remained one of the top four best-supported clubs in the country – and that loyalty continued in the Second Division, but they seemed some way off competing financially with the likes of United, Liverpool, Everton, Arsenal and Tottenham. Fans lay the blame directly at the door of Swales and his supporting directors.

While other clubs were able to spend big in the hope of finding success, the Blues under new boss Billy McNeill had to rely on bargain basement purchases and their youth development programme. Promotion was achieved in 1985, but City's overreliance on their 1986 FA Youth Cup-winning team meant that their talented youngsters were thrown in to first team action, and expected to deliver game after game, competition after competition. Players like David White, Andy Hinchcliffe, Paul Simpson, Ian Brightwell and Paul Lake were undoubtedly talented, but the City of the mid to late 1980s did not have the luxury of being able to rest them or protect them in the manner that Guardiola's City or Ferguson's United were able to.

As a result, Lake, probably the most talented of the lot, suffered significant injuries, while others were not supported effectively when they needed it.

Another relegation in 1987 was followed by promotion in 1989. City hoped to stabilise, and the following September Ferguson's United were humiliated 5-1 by the Blues. At the time, United was the most expensive British team ever assembled, while City's team had cost a mere £1.9m – around £400,000 less than Gary Pallister had cost United. The Reds themselves were borrowing to fund purchases at this point, but unlike the City of the early 1980s, their gambling on players proved successful as football entered the 1990s.

Despite the victory over United, Swales dismissed manager Mel Machin a few weeks later, and he brought in Howard Kendall. The former Everton boss strengthened the squad, and seemed to be creating a platform for future success, but he couldn't resist when his former club offered him the chance of a return to Goodison Park a year after arriving at City. It was a major blow to City's development, but some continuity was ensured when captain Peter Reid was offered the role.

Two fifth-place finishes followed in 1991 and 1992, but the 1992-93 season, the first of the new Premier League, saw Reid's City drop to ninth. Like most seasons since 1980,



Left
Sergio Agüero goes around Queens Park Rangers' Taye Taiwo to score the title-winning goal after 93 minutes and 20 seconds



Above
Pep Guardiola with the Premier League trophy at the homecoming in 2019

there had seen widespread demonstrations by fans against Swales. In the summer, Swales gave Reid a new contract, but demonstrating the lack of planning at the club, four games into the season he sacked his manager. This was the catalyst for further demonstrations. When former playing hero Francis Lee launched a takeover bid, Swales' days as chairman were numbered.

Lee became the new chairman, but the precarious state of City's finances after two decades of mismanagement and the urgent need to invest in ground improvements hampered the club's progress. The appointment of Alan Ball as manager in 1995 brought further misery, and supporters expressed their dissatisfaction. They had been promised a big-name, successful manager, and Ball's appointment did not impress. Inevitably, as many fans had predicted, City struggled and were relegated. The method of their relegation was farcical.

Needing a better result than either Southampton or Coventry, the Blues were level at 2-2 with Liverpool with 12 minutes to go. Ball mistakenly believed City were safe, and ordered the players to hold the ball in the corner. City striker Niall Quinn, who had been substituted, knew the result would not be enough due to the scores elsewhere, and raced down the touchline, urging the players to attack. It was too late, however, and the time wasted gave City no chance to score the needed winner.

A second relegation came in 1998, causing the Blues to drop to the third tier for the first time in their history. These were dark and depressing days.





Left
Manchester City fans pack the North Stand/Kippax Corner at Maine Road for a 5-1 victory over Charlton Athletic at Maine Road on 11 May 1985

David Cannon via Getty



Below
Riyad Mahrez is mobbed by De Bruyne, Walker, Fernandinho, Silva and Foden after scoring the opening goal of the UEFA Champions League second leg semi-final football against Paris Saint-Germain on 4 May 2021

PAUL ELLIS via Getty

REBUILDING THE CLUB

A back-to-basics approach under chairman David Bernstein and manager Joe Royle saw City face life in the third tier. Players like Paul Dickov, Shaun Goater, Kevin Horlock and goalkeeper Nicky Weaver became mainstays of Royle's team, but life was tough. A 2-1 defeat at Lincoln in October 1998 became regarded as the lowest point. But then, over the months that followed, gradually results became more positive. City reached the play-offs, and in dramatic style they defeated Gillingham on penalties at Wembley after two late, late goals from Horlock and Dickov levelled the score at 2-2.

Another dramatic win at Blackburn (4-1) the following year brought promotion back to the Premier League. These four seasons remain the longest spell they have ever endured out of the top flight since the club's first promotion in 1899.

Unfortunately, City's newfound Premier League stay lasted just one season, but new manager Kevin Keegan brought genuine entertainment to the club, and they won promotion as champions in his first season (2001-02). The final year at Maine Road saw Keegan's City finish ninth, and they qualified for the UEFA Cup via the Fair Play League, meaning that the first season at their new stadium would commence with European football.

TRANSFORMATION

Under the direction of chairman John Wardle and manager Keegan, the Blues stabilised and, even when Keegan resigned and was replaced by Stuart Pearce in 2005, City seemed to be comfortable in the top flight. However, when the club's star man, Shaun Wright-Phillips, was sold to Chelsea for £21m in 2005, the realisation dawned that City were financially unable to compete, and were unlikely to challenge for the game's top honours. This feeling was exacerbated when successive FA Cup quarter-finals (versus West Ham in 2006 and at Blackburn in 2007) ended in defeat. Fortunately, things were about to change for the better.

In 2007, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra bought the club, and a year later he sold City to Sheikh Mansour. Immediately, investment in the squad, facilities, stadium and youth development arrived, and the club began its transformation.

Within seven months of the takeover, City had become UEFA Cup quarter-finalists, and the Blues began to look more likely to win trophies than at any time since the early 1990s. Roberto Mancini was appointed manager in December 2009, and after a fifth-place finish that season, City finished third and qualified for the Champions League in 2011. They also found major success when they won the FA Cup by beating Stoke with a goal from the influential Yaya Touré.

> "AGÜERO'S WINNING GOAL AGAINST QUEENS PARK RANGERS WAS SCORED AFTER 93 MINUTES AND 20 SECONDS"

SUSTAINED SUCCESS

The 2011-12 season brought visibility to City's development on a global scale when the Premier League was won on a dramatic final day that saw Sergio Agüero wrestle the title from neighbours United. Agüero's winning goal was scored against QPR after 93 minutes and 20 seconds. United's result at Sunderland had given them the edge, but Agüero's late winner enthralled the world.

After losing the 2013 FA Cup final to relegation-bound Wigan, Mancini was dismissed. His replacement, Manuel Pellegrini, guided City to even greater success. Under his watch, the Blues won the double of League Cup and Premier League (2014), then another League Cup in 2016.

Always viewed as a stepping stone, Pellegrini was replaced by Guardiola in 2016, and a whole host of major trophies have followed, as Pep has eclipsed Joe Mercer as the club's most successful manager. In 2017-18, City won another League Cup and Premier League double, and the following year Pep's City became the first team to win all three domestic honours available to them, plus the Community Shield. Another League Cup followed in 2020.

Despite a mixed start to the 2020-21 season, the Blues began to get into their stride in late November. They powered their way up the table, winning the league with three games to go. The League Cup had already been won with a 1-0 victory over Tottenham, and Pep's City had already reached the final of the Champions League for the first time after a 4-1 aggregate victory over Paris Saint-Germain.

Breaking a whole host of sequence records in 2020-21 as they had in 2018, Pep's City should be regarded as one of the greatest sides English football has ever witnessed. Trophy success is commonplace today, and City is once again regarded as a leading club. Perhaps *the* leading club.

INSIDE THE MAKING OF A SUPERCLUB

Pep Guardiola's exhilarating side is the tip of the iceberg at Manchester City. Investing locally, overseas, in youth and their women's team, they've one goal: global domination

Words Chris Flanagan **Portraits** Stuart Manly Photography



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
DECEMBER 2016

It's an early autumn day on the outskirts of Manchester city centre, and something rather unexpected has just happened. *FourFourTwo* has received a stinging whack to the ribs, and the man responsible is making a swift exit. He's just under six feet tall, slim of build and dressed in black from head to toe. He's also seen by many as the best football manager on the planet. He's Pep Guardiola.

We're pretty sure the Manchester City boss didn't actually intend to inflict pain on *FFT*. Perhaps he just wasn't aware of his own strength, as he shook our hand warmly and dished out a friendly slap to the chest on his way out of the room at the club's training base, a few hundred metres from the Etihad Stadium. He has spent the past few minutes posing for pictures and he appears to be in a very good mood.

It would have been understandable if he wasn't. Guardiola is a busy man – he's preparing to take training in an hour or so – and two days earlier an impressive six-match winning start to the Premier League season had been brought to an end by Spurs. And yet, as *FFT* is granted exclusive behind-the-scenes access to the Catalan's new home, this meeting offers a brief glimpse into his world, and an insight into why footballers love to play for him.

Sometimes it's all about the little details, such as the smile he offers as enters the room, then a greeting and a handshake for one and all. Guardiola understands how to get people onside from the start, and from there he has the charm and charisma to command a room.

Soon he's exchanging quips as our photographer clicks away – but a request to appear thoughtful, stroking his chin, is politely declined. "No, I never pose like that – it's fake, look," he explains, briefly making the pose to demonstrate his point, adding a pout for comedic effect. "It doesn't look natural, see? It's fake!" He laughs. That's the benefit of establishing an instant rapport: it allows him to put his foot down and do things how he believes they should be done, retaining his own clear sense of authenticity without putting noses out of joint.

That rapport the 45-year-old built with his playing squad upon arriving at City quickly paid dividends in the same way. The first 10 matches of his tenure brought 10 victories, 30 goals scored, and players swiftly adapting to the Guardiola way. No doubt that plenty of his charges have also been receiving friendly whacks to the ribs, from a man who's big on tactility as well as tactics.

At Manchester City there is real hope – real belief, in fact – that Guardiola's arrival could prove to be the final piece of the puzzle. For eight years, since Sheikh Mansour completed his purchase of the club from Thaksin Shinawatra, everything seemed to have been building towards the moment when arguably the most respected and innovative coach of his generation walked through the doors at the £150 million City Football Academy. "It's so amazing – the facilities... wow," is how Pep sums it all up to *FourFourTwo*.

They have the facilities and they have the players, in a squad that was the envy of most clubs even before this summer's strengthening. They have the requisite top-level experience, in two Premier League titles and a first run to the Champions League semi-finals earlier this year. But now they also have the coach that they have always wanted; the man they believe can take them to the next level. The Premier League bar may have just been raised. Watch out, world: Manchester City could take some beating for years to come.



Even when Guardiola was still a fortnight away from his official unveiling as City's new coach, he was wasting no time. He picked up the phone and spoke to the players he would soon be working with. First, he introduced himself – not that a man who won the Champions League twice and La Liga three times when managing Barcelona, then three Bundesliga titles while in charge of Bayern Munich, really needs much introduction. Then he explained to each player exactly why he was looking forward to coaching them. It was all about establishing that instant rapport and an understanding that, together, Manchester City could achieve some great things.

For one particular player on the receiving end of that phone call, the conversation was more important than most. A couple of days earlier, Raheem Sterling had been substituted at half-time in England's Euro 2016 group-stage fixture against Wales, after an unconvincing 45 minutes. His performance in England's opening game at the tournament against Russia had already been met with criticism. The young winger's confidence was fragile.

"Don't worry – keep your head up," Guardiola advised Sterling that day. "I know that you're a good player, and you're a big part of my plans. As long as you work for me, I'll fight for you."

Sterling recalls his memories of that conversation as he chats with *FFT* inside one of the Manchester City training facility's many plush meeting rooms. "He phoned me and said that he'd watched me at Liverpool and thought I was a good player," the £44 million wideman remembers. "He said he was looking forward to working with me, which was a massive boost. It was good that he did that: it showed what a good person he is, and it made me look forward to working with him. I went away over the summer thinking about that message from him, and then I came back fighting."

Guardiola's Pep talk was the tonic Sterling needed. Much maligned in an England shirt, the 21-year-old started the new campaign with Manchester City in superb form. Those first 10 games brought five goals and six assists, a far better ratio on both counts than Sterling had managed before, when his end product had been questioned.

"I'm still the same player that I was before, but I'm a player full of confidence now," he says. "As an attacker, he wants you to express yourself and be free, as long as you work for your team-mates when you lose the ball. He told me that every time I get the ball I should go at defenders. He's trying to get that into my head, and it's good when you know your manager has faith that you can create something. It's stuff I've always been able to do – he has just helped me to showcase it on a more regular basis. He's a great guy and a fantastic coach."



It's July 3. City's chief executive, Ferran Soriano, and director of football, Txiki Begiristain, are stood outside the club's training base, waiting for a black cab to arrive. They're joined by club ambassador Mike Summerbee as the taxi pulls in. It contains Guardiola, arriving for his first day in his new job. There is a momentary delay as Pep waits for the door to be unlocked. "The driver won't open the door because he hasn't paid his fare yet," Summerbee quips.

Soon, Guardiola is bounding towards Summerbee and greeting him warmly, before doing the same with Soriano and Begiristain. "I know these guys!" he laughs, and indeed he does. Both were key figures behind the scenes at Barcelona during Guardiola's incredible ▸

Right Pep shows *FFT* how to pose properly. Well, that's us told

Images Stuart Manly Photography

GUARDIOLA'S FLYING STARTS

Manchester City's new boss tends to do well in his first season

BARCELONA 2008-09		BAYERN MUNICH 2013-14
38	Played	34
27	Won	29
6	Drawn	3
5	Lost	2
105	Goals scored	94
35	Goals conceded	23
87	Points	90
1st	League position	1st
Winners	Domestic cup	Winners
Winners	Champions League	Semi-finals

GUARDIOLA WANTS TO LEAVE A LEGACY, LIKE CRUYFF AT BARCELONA

reign at the Camp Nou, and Begiristain was his team-mate when the Blaugrana lifted their first European Cup in 1992. Achieving the same feat with Manchester City is undoubtedly in their sights.

Pep is shown around his new workplace, a tour that includes a visit to watch a group of under-10s training. These children are nearly a decade away from being in a position to challenge for the first team, yet Guardiola's interest in their progress is immediate. "How is the training session going?" he asks them. "What are you doing? Skills? Good. Using both [feet] or just the one? Control left, pass right, and then control right, pass left? Yes? Very good."

This is not a manager who arrives at a new club and interests himself in first-team results and nothing else. Guardiola is keen to instil a philosophy at all ages and leave a legacy at the club, in the same way his mentor Johan Cruyff did at Barcelona.

Manchester City's under-10s look thrilled to have met the new manager, just like everyone else that day. His mere arrival lifted the whole club. Nowhere was that more obvious than when Pep was led outside to a stage to be greeted by thousands of cheering fans. He'd already given a rare one-on-one interview to famous fan Noel Gallagher, for release on the club's YouTube channel at a later date, but it would be on that stage in front of the supporters – not in a closed-off press conference – where he would speak publicly as City boss for the first time. For many of the supporters present that day, it represented the realisation of a dream. Guardiola was really here. Manchester City really had managed to pull off one of the biggest managerial coups in Premier League history.

"That day really was amazing," chief operating officer Omar Berrada tells *FFT*, looking back almost misty-eyed. "We created what we called Cityzens Weekend – over two days, 20,000 fans visited our facilities. Most importantly, we wanted the first contact that Pep would have with the club to be with the fans, as they are so important to everything that we do. We were so pleased to see them all connect with him so quickly."

Berrada also knew Guardiola from Barça, having been the club's head of sponsorship before joining City in 2011, a year prior to the arrival of Soriano and Begiristain. His time with the Camp Nou giants coincided with the Catalans having their first-ever shirt sponsor: children's charity UNICEF, which preceded a lucrative deal with the Qatar Foundation. "I was very fortunate that in my time at Barcelona there was a period of success with Frank Rijkaard as well as Guardiola," Berrada says. "But when I heard about the project the owners were trying to develop here, I was fascinated."

In Manchester, Berrada has helped Man City to continue the work that was initiated in 2008. Revenue has grown each year since the arrival of owner Mansour and chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak, who are both based in Abu Dhabi. The club recently announced a record revenue figure of £391.8 million for 2015-16; eight years ago, it was just £87m. A profit of £20.5m was also reported in the latest figures; 12 months ago they made £10.7m, the first profit of the Mansour era.

Berrada's role has been about much more than that, though. Until September, when his focus turned back to solely City, he was also heavily involved on the commercial side of the City Football Group – Mansour's umbrella group that now owns not just the Premier League club, but MLS side New York City FC and A-League outfit Melbourne City, too. The group also holds a 20 per cent stake in Yokohama F Marinos, winners of the J-League on three occasions.

All three of the clubs that are fully owned by the City Football Group share similar circular club crests, sky blue and white colours, sponsorship from Etihad and, of course, the City name. It has all helped to establish a unified brand that they intend to grow across the world to the benefit of all of their clubs, not least Man City.



Below Omar Berrada and Brian Marwood are two of the men responsible for City's incredible growth

"Most of the top European teams have got a global fanbase, and at Manchester City we have 400 million followers around the world, of which 97 per cent are outside of the UK," Berrada explains. "One of our brand pillars is to be truly global, and we were looking at ways to engage with our fans. You can do that by going on summer tours and by engaging with them on digital platforms – and then the other way we thought we could be relevant is by being present locally in key strategic territories like the US, Australia and Japan. It's a very unique model. It is fascinating to see how we have evolved as an organisation."

It's a strategy they hope will help to establish Manchester City even further in the hearts and minds of Premier League fans around the world. Undoubtedly, many of their rivals have had a huge headstart.

There wasn't much global interest when City were 12th in the third tier at Christmas in 1998, having just lost 2-1 at York, while the likes of Manchester United and Arsenal were dominating at the summit of the Premier League. They've made strides since then that are beyond the wildest dreams of even their most optimistic supporters – but a quick comparison of Twitter followers shows that there is still work to do. At the time *FFT* goes to press, City's total stands at 3.62 million, compared to 6.32 million for Liverpool, 7.45 million for Chelsea, 8.25 million for Arsenal and 9.05 million for Manchester United. Barça boast 18.7 million followers; Real Madrid, 20.9 million. According to Forbes, City are sixth on football's global rich list.

"We don't compare ourselves to other clubs or view it from a perspective of catching up, because we are developing our own strategy, but we need to continue growing," Berrada says. "We don't measure our success by revenue, but we want to continue growing so we are a sustainable organisation and can deliver success.

"We're deeply rooted in the community and we keep that in mind with everything we do as we to try to grow. The core of our fans are here in the UK, and in Manchester specifically. We want them to be happy and we want them to enjoy watching the team play beautiful football."



Man City have spent big on and off the pitch since 2008. There have been some exceptions – the £32.5m signing of Robinho, just hours after Mansour agreed to purchase the club, didn't turn out to be a success – but more often than not their outlays have helped them to make progress.

The £150m they spent on the City Football Academy, the training base which opened in 2014, is certainly an incredible sum of money but it has produced an incredible facility that could reap dividends for

Images Stuart Manly Photography

"WE'VE SPENT MONEY, BUT WE'RE CHANGING THE FORTUNES OF A CITY, NOT JUST A CLUB"

Images Getty Images

1 Etihad Stadium
2 Nexen Tyres bridge
3 Academy Stadium
4 Goalkeeping half-sized pitch
5 Junior academy pitches
6 EDS pitches
7 The Performance Centre
8 Senior youth pitches
9 First-team pitches

decades to come. It is intended to pave the way for a conveyor belt of Manchester City youth talent that could keep the club at the top for the long term.

"We are building a structure for the future, and not just a team of all-stars," is the quote *FFT* reads on the wall just inside the facility's entrance as we begin our tour. Mansour has never deviated from the commitment he verbally laid out with his takeover in September 2008.

The tour takes some time. There are 16 and a half pitches – the half is for goalkeeper training – and they're looked after by no fewer than 16 groundstaff. One is an artificial pitch painted in Manchester City blue, besieged by birds that continually confuse it for a lake. Four more are of different grass mixes, so the first-team manager can train on the pitch most similar to the surface they'll be playing their next away match on. Another is shielded from the wind by huge walls, allowing Guardiola to work on set-pieces in a stadium-style setting in the final training session before a game. All first-team pitches have been blocked from prying eyes, mostly by trees. City remember all too well how the open nature of their old Carrington training ground allowed photographers to take embarrassing snaps of a scuffle between Roberto Mancini and Mario Balotelli, laying bare the issues within their camp midway through the 2012-13 season.

By the following summer both men would be gone, having each played their part in a much happier moment 12 months earlier. In one of the City Football Academy's gyms, a wall is emblazoned with the words 'Every Second Counts'. *FFT* wonders briefly if City's designer was a fan of early-'90s game shows hosted by Paul Daniels, but then we turn and see a gigantic picture of a celebrating Sergio Agüero on the opposite wall, accompanied by the digits '93:20'.

That, of course, was the time on the clock when Sergio Agüero – or 'Agüerooooooooo!', as he was known at that moment – scored against QPR to deliver Manchester City their first league title of the Mansour era. That it denied Manchester United top spot was a nice bonus for fans who hadn't seen their club win the division since 1968.

It was City's 'Up For Grabs Now' moment – a moment their fans will always cherish, in the same way Arsenal supporters still celebrate Michael Thomas' late title-winning goal at Liverpool in 1989. Both goals still mean plenty to Brian Marwood, an Arsenal player then and a man who has helped to oversee the rise of Manchester City since 2009, first as football administrator alongside Mark Hughes and Mancini, before becoming academy director and now the managing director of football services across all of the City Football Group. Asked to describe what was going through his head when City faced QPR, Marwood can't help but immediately burst into laughter. "I'd be severely understating the fact that it was an emotional rollercoaster," he smiles. "To be losing the game with minutes to go... I just remember thinking: 'How have we lost this?'

"I was injured at the time but I was there when Arsenal won at Anfield, which people still talk about now. I think people will talk about Sergio's goal in the same way. I actually feel sorry for Edin Dzeko as his goal was the equaliser, and no one talks about that.

"The fact that they were unwrapping the trophy at the Stadium of Light for Manchester United, only for us to win it in that fashion – I've never experienced such elation but also so much tiredness at the same time. I couldn't celebrate, I was just so drained by it all.

"Having won the league, the club gathered momentum, people gathered belief and we gathered credibility and respect for what we were doing. I don't think that was the case in the early days – people said, 'You're just throwing money at it', and, yes, none of us can deny that we've spent money. But we've done it for the right reasons. Our owners have not only changed the fortunes of a football club; they've also changed the fortunes of a city, and that's very rare these days.

"This is one of the most unique projects in world football; maybe only Red Bull have a similar model as they own clubs, too [New York Red Bulls, Red Bull Salzburg, Red Bull Brasil and RB Leipzig]. But for us to have arguably the best manager in the world and everything that we have here in place, it's been remarkable progress in eight years."

Marwood credits Al Mubarak with much of the rapid progress. The Englishman occasionally has direct contact with Mansour but liaises more closely with the chairman, whose other business commitments include an involvement with Formula 1's Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

"He's had a huge passion for this project from the very first day, and his knowledge of everything we're doing is remarkable when you think that he's got lots of other things going on in his world," says Marwood, 56. "We're extremely fortunate to have not only the ▶

THANKS A BILLION

Manchester City's transfer spending reached nine figures in just nine seasons under Sheikh Mansour

2008-09 **£82.5 million**
2009-10 **£125m**
2010-11 **£154.8m**
2011-12 **£76m**
2012-13 **£54m**
2013-14 **£103.2m**
2014-15 **£87.5m**
2015-16 **£152.1m**
2016-17 **£168.9m**

TOTAL
£1,004,000,000

owners that we have, but also a chairman who is probably the best figurehead I've ever known – and I've been in football since I was 16."

When *FFT* asks at what point Guardiola's name was first mentioned at Manchester City as a man they'd like to be their head coach one day, Marwood's response is instant. "It was 2008, I think – we would have loved to have him then!" he says with a smile. The answer is only half-serious: Marwood wasn't at the club at that point, and Pep was barely a few games into his managerial career with Barcelona.

City's realistic hopes of attracting their dream manager came with the arrival of Begiristain in October 2012. Guardiola was a free agent at that point, on a year's sabbatical after leaving Barça, but Mancini had just delivered City the title in dramatic fashion and Guardiola had already started discussions about moving to Bayern Munich on a three-year deal from the summer of 2013. City would have to bide their time, but Guardiola had long since indicated to Begiristain that when he was ready to move to England, it would be to link up with his former Barcelona team-mate, who had once played a key role in his promotion to first-team coach at the Camp Nou. When his deal at Bayern was running to a close, he decided that the time was right.

"Obviously we benefited from the relationship that Txiki and Ferran had with Pep from his Barcelona days," Marwood says. "But I think Guardiola also needed to see and get an understanding of what Manchester City was all about. It wasn't just about working with two people he was close to; it was about being able to work in an environment where he could see that everything was just right.

"Now he's here, I think he's very pleased with what he's walked into. Now we need to reach another level. We've fallen short in the Champions League and we've fallen a little bit short in the league in the last year or two. We want to be successful. We want to win."



On February 1 this year, it was announced that Guardiola would be joining Manchester City and that Manuel Pellegrini would move on. From there, two campaigns after Pellegrini had guided them to their second championship under Mansour, City's title challenge fell apart.

Many put that down to 'lame duck' syndrome, but it overlooks City's failure to beat another top-five team all season. They took 16 points from 18 games against sides in the top half of the table – a worse record than 13 of the league's other teams. Worse than relegated Newcastle, in fact. And, in the same week Pellegrini's departure was announced, City's star performer was ruled out for 10 weeks with knee and ankle ligament damage. Without him, they soon lost 3-1 at home to Leicester, a result that set both clubs on very different paths. That man was Kevin De Bruyne, who has now arrived to talk to *FFT*.

Despite missing a sizeable chunk of the campaign, De Bruyne was deservedly City's player of the season. From the minute he arrived from Wolfsburg for £55m, the Belgian midfielder has felt at home.

"I think my form started at Wolfsburg, where it went really well," De Bruyne says. "Then I came here and immediately felt welcome. There's a family atmosphere, and for me that's important as I am an easy-going guy, and I prefer that people act like we're all human. Footballers are not robots getting orders; we have good days but we have bad days as well, just like every normal person. But the people here help you. It was a good choice to come here."

De Bruyne insists this despite his first campaign with the Etihad Stadium side ultimately ending in disappointment.

"It was a little bit hard last year: we started very well but we had so many injuries," the 25-year-old says. "In the Champions League we went as far as the semi-finals, so we did play some good stuff – just not quite enough to win any titles. We did really well in Europe. To lose 1-0 over two legs in



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the semi-final with an own goal – that can happen. And it was against Real Madrid."

Yet for such a free-scoring side, there seemed a lack of verve about City in each leg of that semi-final. While he is proud of the team for reaching the last four, chairman Al Mubarak has since admitted he felt some disappointment about the manner of defeat. "I don't think we actually showed up for that game," he said. "In both legs, there was too much we could have done that we didn't do."

De Bruyne is keen to stress it was not down to any lack of effort. "Everybody gave what they had," he says. "Everyone ran their socks off, so it wasn't that we could have gone for it more. But sometimes it just doesn't work out the way that you want it to."

If there are any regrets, this season provides an opportunity to put them right. For De Bruyne, his tale centres around two away matches against Steaua Bucharest. He was a Chelsea player when the Blues travelled there for a Champions League game in 2013. Struggling to win the affections of Jose Mourinho, having arrived from Belgium during Andre Villas-Boas' reign, De Bruyne was left at home when the squad travelled to Romania. Quizzed about the decision before the game, Jose stormed out of a press conference.

Four months later, De Bruyne asked to leave and join Wolfsburg. He never did win over Mourinho, and he's still unable to explain why.

"I've no idea and I don't care," he says, the tone of his voice briefly giving away his frustration about that period of his career. "I waited for four months, then I said to myself that I wanted to play football every week. I couldn't get the game time I wanted, so leaving was the obvious choice. I wanted to start a new chapter – not be loaned out and come back to the exact same situation. It was a really smart move on my part. But of all of the choices I have made in my career, I don't regret one of them – even going to Chelsea. It just didn't work out. I wanted to play football; I didn't; so I left."

Things were quite different when Manchester City travelled out to Steaua Bucharest for a Champions League qualifier this season: the second match of Guardiola's reign. The visitors romped to a 5-0 win, and the combination of De Bruyne, Agüero, Sterling and David Silva clicked in a way that it never had done last term, with Nolito thrown in for good measure. Nolito scored one and Silva another, while Agüero bagged three – the striker even able to miss two penalties.

De Bruyne says he realised then how special Pep's Manchester City could be. "It was a tough game," he says. "When you go there and win 5-0, everyone says it's an easy game, but we did really well and it could have been a lot more. That, and winning 4-1 at Stoke just afterwards, really helped. We were trying a new system, so if you start with a couple of wins you can see the coach's ideas working.

"My role is a little bit different now. We don't play with a real No.10, so I am maybe a little bit less attacking than I was last season, but ▸

"I IMMEDIATELY FELT WELCOME AT THIS CLUB. THERE'S A FAMILY ATMOSPHERE"



Images Getty Images/Stuart Manly Photography

I have played in that position before at other clubs. Defensively we are playing at a different pace – we're chasing the ball much quicker. It's hard work, but in the end it does make life easier for everyone.

"It's not like he has changed a lot – football is still football – but it's his eye for detail that counts. Not everybody goes full length on every detail, but he does. He's trying to make everybody better. All the little things, like physical work, injury prevention and diet, he does to get people fitter quicker.

"When he speaks to me, we speak about everything. It is not always football; he also speaks about family and life out of football. It's not always 'focus, focus'. He was a player himself so he's very good at knowing about the balance of when to joke and when to be serious. Before a game he'll be really quiet: he does his meetings a couple of hours before the match, and then we are doing stuff on our own. By then, everybody knows what we need to do."

Guardiola's first big test at City came against Mourinho's Manchester United at Old Trafford. De Bruyne was superb that day, scoring one and setting up another as City won 2-1. It was a performance that established him as the bookmakers' early favourite to win this season's PFA Player of the Year award – although he's quick to play that down. "I'm not thinking about being the best player in the league," he tells *FFT*. "I want to win titles for the club. That's more important."

De Bruyne is also quick to play down suggestions that producing arguably his best display of the season so far against Manchester United, on the first occasion he had faced Mourinho since the Portuguese manager sanctioned De Bruyne's sale from Chelsea, may not have been entirely coincidental. "Yes, but the team was great in that game," he insists, refusing to take credit for his own performance in the derby victory. "A lot of people were talking about me because I scored a goal, but we played really well."



Making his debut for Manchester City in that all-important win was Claudio Bravo, the man Guardiola had headhunted as his new goalkeeper after choosing to demote stalwart Joe Hart.

The England No.1 probably didn't know it at the time – like all of those who had featured at Euro 2016, he was still on holiday – but the seeds of his demise were sown on the very first day of pre-season. That day, Pep set up a session with his new squad. He stationed Willy Caballero in one goal and Republic of Ireland Under-21 goalkeeper Ian Lawlor in the other. Then he passed the ball to one or the other, and instructed them to play the ball out from the back. It was an exercise for the outfield players as much as the keepers: this was how Guardiola intended to play, and he was showing his squad how to make it work. "Byline, Fernando! Byline!" he shouted, instructing the Brazilian to drop all the way back to the goal-line to make himself available for a pass. Caballero clearly impressed more than Hart ever did in such sessions, because the veteran Argentine was chosen to start the new season in goal. Soon, Hart went to Torino on loan and Bravo joined from Barcelona.

"Guardiola called me and said he believed in me, and it filled me with excitement to be part of this project," Bravo explains to *FFT*. The 33-year-old had never worked with the Manchester City boss before – he joined the Catalan club from Real Sociedad two years after Pep had left – but the pull was strong enough to convince him to give up his role at the Camp Nou and move to England.

"When he shows such confidence in you that he is personally requesting your signing, it's difficult to say no," the Chile keeper adds. "Logically, Manchester City is more attractive to players with Guardiola in charge, for the style and philosophy he brings. He has changed the team's dynamic. He gives this football club something extra every day – something you can't quite define."

With a former Barcelona manager, a former Barcelona goalkeeper, several ex-Barcelona backroom staff members and three former Barcelona men in senior positions in the club hierarchy, it's inevitable that some will compare Manchester City with the club where so many of their employees used to work. For their part, City are keen to point out that they are not trying to copy what Barça have done, but to forge their own identity. Bravo, too, is reluctant to compare the two clubs.

"From a footballing perspective there are certainly similarities, but I don't want to make comparisons between the teams," the keeper says. "Each club has their way of preparing for a game; each team has different players. We have confidence in what we're doing and we think success will come. The whole world knows what Barcelona means – the players that have played there over the years are incredible and I will be forever grateful to them. But this club is on the up. You can see it in every game. We have great players in every position and we can only grow and improve, especially with the incredible coach we have. Who wouldn't want to be part of that?"

Bravo speaks in such upbeat tones, despite the undoubted pressure facing him in replacing Hart, a goalkeeper loved by City's fans having made nearly 350 appearance across a decade with the club. "At this level you've got to live with pressure," Bravo says. "If you don't deal well with pressure, it would impossible to play for either Barcelona or Manchester City, to play for your country or to win titles. You just can't think about who might have been playing in goal before you – you just have to find a way of performing at the highest level.

"I just try to do the best I can in whatever way I can, playing out from the back, constantly talking to my defence... modern football now requires a goalkeeper who can give the ball to the feet of the centre-backs, not clear it at the first sign of danger. I touch the ball with my feet about 40 times in each game – that begins the dynamic of how we want to play. We don't have the players upfront to play long ball and nor did we at Barcelona, so you play to suit your style. We want the ball to go forwards in a clean way, from back to front."

Things didn't run smoothly for Bravo on his debut at Old Trafford. Though City triumphed, a dropped cross allowed Zlatan Ibrahimovic to score. Guardiola's reaction was telling. After the game, he called Bravo's display "one of the best performances I have ever seen", pointing out that the keeper had started the move for De Bruyne's goal by building out from the back. He was standing by his man.

"It's very important when your coach talks positively about you like that," says Bravo, who was once benched for a period by Chris Coleman during the Welsh manager's six-month stint in charge of Real Sociedad. "It supports you, even though you know you've made a mistake by colliding with a player and conceding a goal.

"But that was a special game. We knew that it was a match of enormous magnitude and we were very happy to win, but what meant more was the way we did it. We want our identity to be publicly known – to dominate the ball for as many minutes as possible. That day was all about fully establishing our identity."



Equally important to that identity and that desire to play out from the back is John Stones. Signed from Everton for £47.5m, the 22-year-old became the most expensive defender in British football history. ▸

"AS AN EX-PLAYER, HE KNOWS WHEN TO JOKE AND WHEN TO BE SERIOUS"

CITY'S YOUTH TEAM TROPHY COUNT: 2015-16

UNDER-10S
- Premier League National Futsal
- Wormerveer Tournament
- PT Sports Cup
- Raddatz Immobilien Cup

UNDER 11S
- Deichmann Cup
- Premier League National Finals


UNDER 12S
- Champions Cup, Frankfurt

UNDER 13S
- Premier League International Tournament

UNDER 14S
- Torneo Reino de Leon, Spain

UNDER 15S
- Premier League Floodlit Cup Northern Division
- Premier League Floodlit Cup Super-Final
- Cayman Islands Airways Youth Cup

UNDER 18S
- Premier League North
- Premier League National



Stones is the last of a quartet of first-team players, combined value £163.6m, to talk to *FFT*. Asked how quickly he made the decision to join Manchester City once he knew of their interest, a smile appears on the centre-back's face. "Instantly," he says. "It was something I couldn't turn down. For anyone in my position, when Pep wants you to join the club, it's a no-brainer. He's the best manager in the world, and to be given the opportunity to learn from him was massive.

"I watched Pep when he was at Barcelona and Bayern, but now that I'm here working with him it's even better than I expected. He gets us all on the same page, knowing our jobs and responsibilities when we're on the pitch. For any manager, getting that across to the players is one of the biggest things, and he does it well. We all go out there knowing how we want to play and how we should play."

The young Yorkshireman's own role is to create what Guardiola calls *el efecto mariposa* – the butterfly effect. It's an ethos the City boss learned from Johan Cruyff. "For him, one good pass at the beginning could create absolutely everything," Guardiola explained recently. Guardiola believes Stones can provide that pass at the beginning – the pass that starts City's route towards goal. Renowned for his qualities on the ball, the young defender is relishing the task.

"It's what I've done from 16 years old, when I was at Barnsley," Stones tells *FFT*. "I've always been encouraged to play out from the back. I've learned the hard way sometimes – every player needs to go through those phases – but it's really good to play in a passing team. It's something that we try to work on: to keep the ball and be patient with it, but to be useful with it, too, and not just keep it for nothing. When you have got the ball, you're in control."

Stones has often been described as a player who would perhaps be most suited to playing in La Liga. He says that he is unaware whether there was ever interest from Spanish clubs during his time at Everton and accepts that, in joining a Manchester City side with an inherently Spanish style, he may well have found the perfect solution. "I would have to learn Spanish there!" he jokes.

What he knows for certain is that there was substantial interest from Jose Mourinho in the summer of 2015, when Chelsea made a number of bids for his services, the last of them climbing as high as £38m. Everton rejected each and every one, and while Stones admits that he was disappointed at the time, he believes that his move to Manchester City may have seen him end up at a club more befitting his style than Chelsea would ever have been.

"Coming here probably is more suited to my game," he says. "At the time, the Chelsea situation was difficult. But some things aren't meant to happen. When it didn't go through, that was it – I couldn't do anything about it. You can't dwell on it too much. I didn't want to do that, either for myself or my team-mates at Everton; I wanted to keep playing on for them, for the fans and for the club. We weren't always winning matches at Everton, but that's when you learn a lot about yourself – when you're going through those difficult times. I'm just really happy to be here now and enjoying my football."

Not that he expects everything to be plain sailing. Spurs overcame Manchester City at the start of October by employing an extremely high-energy pressing game designed to prevent Stones & Co. from starting moves from the back. Celtic had done the same thing a few days previously in a 3-3 Champions League draw with City. But that won't deter Pep from his principles. "We take it as a compliment that teams are trying to stop how we've been playing," says Stones. "Even in those games, we wanted to stay true to ourselves and keep playing how we have always played, because to compete against our sort of football you have to run – you can't press for 90 minutes.

"Unfortunately against Spurs it didn't come off, but you can't win every game. What's important is that when things got tough, we did not divert from what we know about how to play football.

"We will keep trying to break the other team down. Teams are coming at us and pressing us, but I'm sure we will find a way to get through. Everyone here wants to win the Premier League. If we go about it the right way, hopefully we'll achieve that."



More than 3,000 miles away, the sun is shining at the State University of New York, just to the north of Manhattan. Patrick Vieira is sat in his office at what is currently the training base of New York City FC. Head coach Vieira has spent the past couple of hours speaking to the American media after the MLS club announced plans earlier that day for a new permanent training facility in Orangeburg, a few miles further north-west. The facility is due to be opened in 2018 and is being designed by Rafael Vinoly, the same Uruguayan architect who created the City Football Academy in Manchester and Melbourne City's training base of the same name. It's been less than two years since New York City FC played their first match but, as in Manchester and Melbourne, the City Football Group are putting plans in place for the long term.

It was Soriano who played the key role in the early stages of New York City FC. It was he who held talks with MLS head honchos back in 2008 about the possibility of Barcelona becoming involved in a new team in Miami. But when the league announced plans for a second soccer club in New York they approached Soriano, who was by then at Manchester City, and were met with an extremely positive response.

So far, it's working out rather well for all concerned. After ranking 17th out of 20 teams in MLS last season, this year they have made the play-offs for the first time. That upturn in fortunes came after the decision to relieve Jason Kreis of his duties at the end of last season and replace him with Vieira, who had previously been working as manager of Manchester City's elite development squad. The former Arsenal midfielder impressed in that role, and he is now continuing to impress after stepping into senior coaching in New York, where he works with director of football Claudio Reyna, another ex-Manchester City player.

"I've enjoyed it from the day I arrived," Vieira tells *FFT*, speaking as he prepares to jet off to Mexico with the squad for a friendly. "I wanted to stay part of the City family – that was really important for me. When they proposed that I take charge of New York City FC, I said yes because I would be working with the people that I know really well; people who will support me no matter what. That was a huge part of my decision to come over to America.

"I'm really close to Brian Marwood. He's my mentor; the one who really guides me. I'm also working with Ferran and Txiki – people I really like. That's the human side of it. Making the play-offs is an achievement, especially after only two years. But it's just a small step towards what we want to achieve. We're looking at the bigger picture, and the bigger picture is to win something."

Vieira first joined Manchester City six years ago, when he was still a player. His final appearance before hanging up his boots came in the 2011 FA Cup Final against Stoke, as the club claimed their first trophy under Sheikh Mansour. The former Arsenal warrior is ambitious to help New York City FC lift their first trophy, too, even while being very aware that it may take some time.

"We know that we have to catch up to some other teams in MLS, but we're on the right path," Vieira says. "I've changed a few things, bringing in some double sessions and a lot more video analysis of our opponents. And something that was really important to me was how we travel. Players were travelling in their own gear and I didn't understand that. It's important to be representing our club, so now when we travel we are all dressed the same.

"We play our home games at Yankee Stadium, which is a fantastic experience. When you talk about Yankee Stadium as a French boy,



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"I'VE HAD TO LEARN THE HARD WAY SOMETIMES, BUT IT'S REALLY GOOD TO PLAY IN A PASSING TEAM NOW"

Above Stones is comfortable with playing out from the back, something he's done since his time with Barnsley



THE CITY FOOTBALL ACADEMY IN NUMBERS

The key facts and figures behind Manchester City's impressive £150m training facility

450

Players training every week, from Under-6 level all the way up to the senior team

80 ACRES

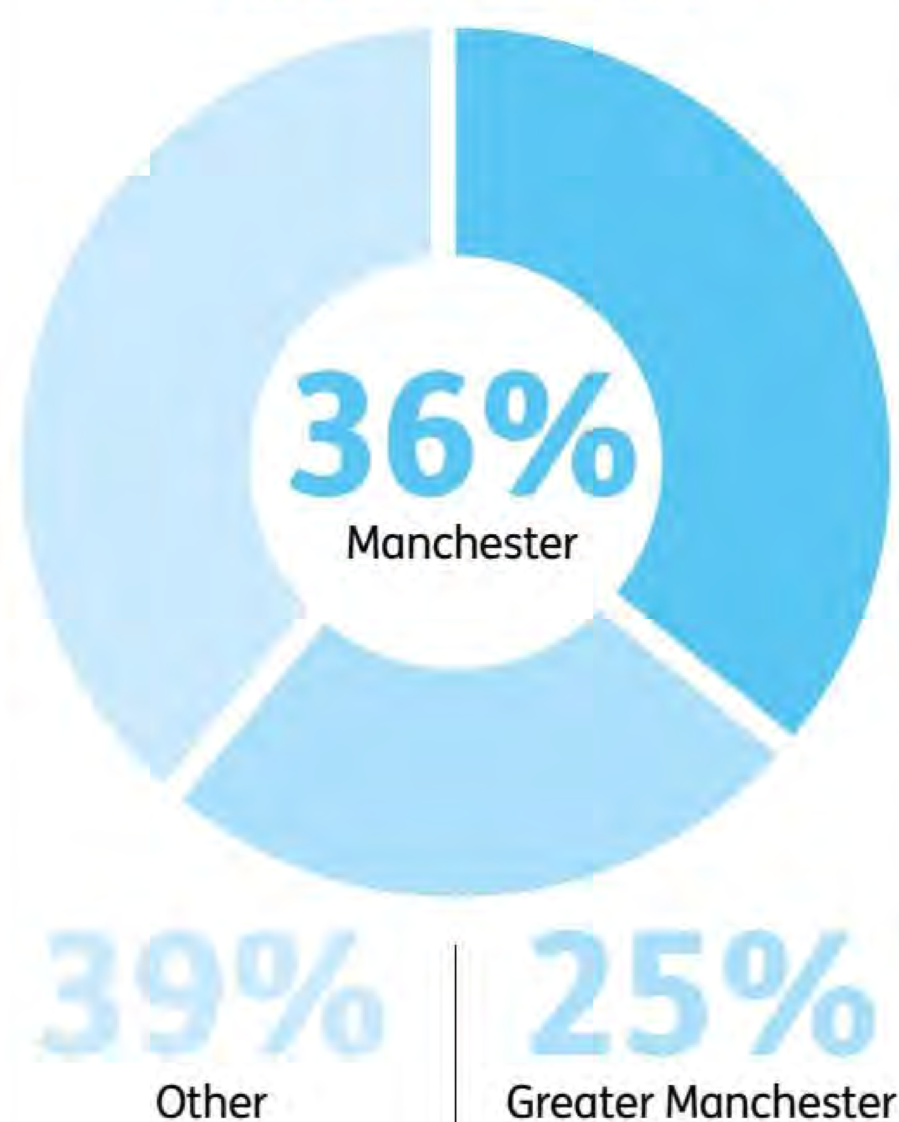
Of brownfield industrial site redeveloped to help create the City Football Academy

16.5 Pitches at the City Football Academy

19 Ground staff employed to look after those pitches and the playing surface at the Etihad Stadium

7000 Full capacity of Academy Stadium

GEOGRAPHICAL SPLIT OF ACADEMY PLAYERS



7500

Number of people who worked on the construction of the City Football Academy and the surrounding area

80%

Proportion of water needed to irrigate the pitches that is provided by a water tank under the City Football Academy

190m

Span of the bridge that connects the Academy Stadium to Etihad Stadium

74%

GCSE pass rate for City players at St Bede's College, seven points above national average

2000 New mature trees brought onto the site

you know that it's a symbolic place. When you look at what the City Group have put in place, the way they're thinking is completely different to how other people and other football clubs think. To be part of what they're trying to do here is really exciting."

Baseball icons the New York Yankees actually own 20 per cent of New York City FC, and playing at their stadium in the heart of the city has helped the football club to establish a fanbase in the Big Apple. Aided by the recruitment of David Villa, Frank Lampard and Andrea Pirlo, average attendances are now nearing 30,000. They were clever acquisitions: as well as being three players known around the globe, Villa appeals to New York's sizeable Hispanic population, Pirlo to its Italian community and Lampard to Premier League fans.

"It'd be difficult to find better players to make people aware of the club's existence," Vieira says. "When you have those players, it helps you to be heard around the world. They are fantastic human beings, too, and I've been pleased with how they are playing."

Alongside them is a 19-year-old English winger in the shape of Stoke-born Jack Harrison, who was a former youth team player at Manchester United. "He's doing really well," Vieira enthuses. "He's a really talented young player with a very bright future."

Harrison's debut was the one bright spot of a 7-0 defeat to New York Red Bulls in May, but Vieira's side hit back to claim a first victory over their local rivals two months later. "Red Bulls are a few years ahead of us but we've closed the gap," Vieira says of his own club, the ambitious noisy neighbours in the same way Manchester City were to United a few years ago. In Manchester the balance of power has shifted, and perhaps the same thing will happen in New York some time soon. If it does, don't be surprised to see Vieira's name linked with a host of managerial jobs on this side of the Atlantic. City aren't ruling out the possibility that the 40-year-old will be manager at the Etihad one day.

"We always talk about succession planning, whether it's in the academy or with physios, doctors or performance analysts," Marwood says, when asked about Vieira. "We've felt very strongly that we want to create really good coaches within the group. Obviously we're very fortunate to have one of the best managers in the world right now, but we have to look to the future. We all hope he's going to stay here for a long time, but at the same time we have to develop our coaches from within. Whether any of those coaches will eventually become manager of Manchester City, New York City, Melbourne City or Yokohama F Marinos, we don't know. But we feel we should take people on that journey to see whether they are capable of doing it."



Above Al Mubarak and Vieira have high hopes for teenage star Jack Harrison **Top right** The sun sets on the league and cup double winners

On the opposite side of the world, Tim Cahill has been watching Vieira's progress with interest. In August this year, the 36-year-old former Millwall, Everton and New York Red Bulls midfielder joined Melbourne City, who were bought by the City Football Group in January 2014. Previously known as Melbourne Heart, the club had joined the A-League in 2010 but never managed to finish more than halfway up the league standings.

Aided by David Villa, on loan from New York City FC until the start of the MLS season, and the effervescent Damien Duff, they improved to finish fifth in their first full campaign under new ownership. In 2015-16, they moved up another place to fourth thanks to some fine displays from Australian international midfielder Aaron Mooy, who joined the club from Western Sydney Wanderers on the understanding that the City Football Group could help to fulfil his ambitions in the game. The 26-year-old has since earned an unexpected move to Manchester City, and impressed on loan with Huddersfield Town this season.

However, the City Football Group wanted a true figurehead for Melbourne, as they had in New York with Pirlo, Villa, Lampard and Vieira, and as they had in the early days at Manchester City with Carlos Tevez. They wanted a man who could grab the attention; a man who would show that they were thinking big in Australia.

So they turned to Cahill, one of the Socceroos' greatest ever footballers, who was at that time playing in the Chinese Super League with Hangzhou Greentown. "To be someone who they targeted to become part of their family makes me feel happy – it feels like a reward for such a great career," Cahill tells *FFT*.

"I had my medical in New York and I met the marquee players, and the best thing was spending some time with Patrick Vieira and Claudio Reyna, asking questions and talking to Patrick about how he started with City and then transitioned into coaching. I feel like I'm in that position. I'm 36 and I want to do more on the pitch, but I also want to transition into what Patrick has done."

Melbourne City came up with a deal that suited Cahill down to the ground. His three-year contract begins with two seasons as a player, taking him up to what he hopes will be his fourth World Cup finals with Australia, and then a third year that will see him take up a role working in City Football Group's coaching setup.

"That was one of the biggest reasons why I signed – for the future," he says, speaking days before scoring a spectacular long-range goal on his debut for the club. "I spoke to Mikel Arteta, one of my closest friends in football who is working as a coach under Pep Guardiola at Manchester City now, and it's given him a strong platform to do what he loves.

"When I played in Abu Dhabi with Australia, I got to meet Khaldoon [Al Mubarak] and talk about the City Football Group, and it's amazing to see that someone so powerful has such a desire to do well. These guys aren't here for a short time – they are here to stick around forever and change the face of the game. Their presentations blow you away."

Melbourne will strive for success using the exact same footballing philosophy employed in New York and Manchester. "It's fantastic – I've never seen anything like it," says Cahill, whose enthusiasm for the whole project is abundantly clear throughout his conversation with *FFT*. "You hear from the main bosses about the setup over in Manchester and the way that Pep Guardiola wants football played, which you've seen already in the Premier League – it's exceptional – and then you go to New York City FC and see training, watch Patrick, see the tactics, see the videos, the formations and everything that happens, and it's no different. It's the same with us here in Australia, and it's fantastic to have an ethos like that."



The City Football Group's plan involves Asia, too – very much so, in fact. They already have their minority stake in Japanese side Yokohama F Marinos, who are owned by group sponsors Nissan and are already benefiting from the expertise of Manchester City. On the day *FFT* visits the City Football Academy, four officials from Yokohama are there on a fact-finding mission.

The City Football Group aren't ruling out further additions to their list of clubs in the future, with China a likely destination. Manchester City went over to the Far East during pre-season and chief operating officer Omar Berrada pinpoints it as a very important market, saying they're keeping "an open mind" about how they can grow their presence in the country. That has already involved them selling a 13 ▸

Images PA Images/Getty Images





per cent stake in the City Football Group to the China Media Capital consortium in late 2015 for a huge sum of £265m, giving the group a valuation of more than £2 billion.

That deal took place with the aim of boosting City's presence in China; chairman Al Mubarak makes it very clear that there are no plans for Mansour to relinquish any more of his stake. It came just over a month after Chinese president Xi Jinping made a personal visit to the City Football Academy in Manchester alongside then-Prime Minister David Cameron. It was a visit that produced a piece of marketing gold for the club.

"That was initiated by Sergio Agüero – and it was all completely unplanned," Berrada chuckles. "He wanted to take a selfie and luckily the Chinese president accepted – David Cameron, too. It was fantastic to see that picture on the front page of major newspapers around the world, and every time we go over to China, people reference it.

"We were honoured to receive the Chinese president. It was all part of a state visit and he wanted to see a good example of youth development facilities, because there's a big focus in China now on developing grassroots facilities. We want to be part of the story in China, and help to continue developing football there, as well as in Japan, south-east Asia and Asia in general.

"There are some fascinating markets that we think could have a role in football in the future – maybe India, Indonesia, Vietnam. There are markets where football hasn't traditionally been the number one sport but is now starting to grow very quickly."



President Xi isn't alone in asking for a look around City's youth facilities. "The number of requests we get is ginormous," says the club's head of academy coaching, former Blackburn Rovers title-winning winger Jason Wilcox. "Clubs want to come, and so do other football associations, different sports, performance and arts – everyone wants to see what we're doing."

That's not just because of the sheer scale of the facilities, but because they're already getting results. As well as paying sizeable sums to recruit some of the finest young talents in world football – Leroy Sané, Marlos Moreno and Oleksandr Zinchenko signed for Manchester City in the summer, and Gabriel Jesus arrives in the new year – the club's own youth teams, led by academy director Mark Allen, are becoming increasingly successful.

The under-18s were national league champions last season, as well as being FA Youth Cup finalists for a second year running, while the under-16s and under-14s both claimed eye-opening 9-0 wins over Liverpool and Manchester United respectively. In total, the club's junior teams won 14 trophies last term, right down to under-10 level. Understandably, Wilcox is excited. "We have got great players coming through," he says. "We want a steady stream of first-team players coming from our academy."

It was the city of Manchester that produced the Class of '92, the group of players who'd help rivals United to dominate the Premier League for years. City would love to do something similar one day.

"That's the aim," Wilcox says. "Barcelona did it; Man United did it. Whether we are going to produce six or seven star players in a short period remains to be seen, but what we've got to try to do is produce multi-million-pound footballers who are Manchester City through and through. This has always been a club of the community and the fans are as excited about getting a young player through as they are about signing a player for £50m. What we've got to do is produce a player of our own worth £50m – and why not? We're capable of doing it and we have a manager who believes in giving young lads an opportunity.

"CITY SNAPPED UP ENGLAND'S BEST PLAYERS: TONI DUGGAN, JILL SCOTT, KAREN BARDSLEY AND STEPH HOUGHTON"



Pep Guardiola watches the under-18 games on a Saturday morning when he can – he always makes time to say hello – and when the youngsters go to train with the first team they're used to all of the drills, because we have been developing this style of football for quite a while now."

City haven't forgotten the importance of the parents, either. At the City Football Academy there's an impressive indoor area, complete with creche, from where they can watch training when it rains (this is Manchester after all) or when temperatures drop, and even on-site hotel rooms reserved for them if they're visiting their children from some distance away.

Some of City's young talent is from further afield: there's optimism about Spaniards Brahim Diaz, Aleix Garcia, Pablo Maffeo and Manu Garcia, as well as the left-back Angelino, whose progress was aided by a loan spell at New York City FC. But there are also potential stars who were born in Manchester, such as Tosin Adarabioyo, Cameron Humphreys-Grant and Brandon Barker, to name just three. The latter is one of four players currently out on loan at NAC Breda in the Netherlands, due to a partnership agreement that will see the Dutch second-division side provide Man City youngsters with experience of first-team football.

Some 61 per cent of the Blues' academy players hail from Greater Manchester; 36 per cent from the city itself. "People like to say that we are not signing up local talent but, despite the perception, we have got a lot of good Manchester boys," states Wilcox.

"We want the best local talent here with us. It would horrify me if the best Manchester boys were choosing to play for Liverpool or someone else instead. There's a lot of talent in this city."

The biggest task will be to convert the talent that has flourished at youth level into players who can then establish themselves in the first team. "The level of talent we have to find is somebody who can come through and replace David Silva, Vincent Kompany or Sergio Agüero, and that's really tough," Brian Marwood admits. But 20-year-old Kelechi Iheanacho is proof that the step up can be made: the Nigerian striker has impressed so greatly since his debut last season that he is now second only to Agüero in City's pecking order upfront, with Wilfried Bony joining Stoke on loan.



More than 4,000 people turned up at the Academy Stadium in late September, first-team captain Vincent Kompany included, to watch another of City's sides achieve success. In front of a record crowd, Manchester City Women overcame title-holders Chelsea to clinch the Women's Super League crown and become national winners for the first time in their history. They followed that achievement by winning the WSL Continental Cup a week later.

The team was only founded in 1988 and the FA's decision to include them in the top tier of the new, expanded Super League in 2014 was not without its controversy, with some questioning whether they had done enough on the field to merit their place. But Marwood and City had persuaded the governing body that they had big plans. While Manchester United currently have no women's team at all, the City Football Group wanted to invest heavily in the female game and succeed, too.

Soon they began snapping up some of England's best players: Toni Duggan, Karen Bardsley, Jill Scott, Izzy Christiansen, Lucy Bronze, and Steph Houghton, captain of the national team and star of the Team GB side at the 2012 Olympics.

"It was a risk," Houghton admits of her decision to leave Arsenal, where she had won two league titles. "But when I signed, I knew the club wanted to win trophies, even if it might not be possible in the first couple of years. It has been a fantastic season. I won ▸

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"LAST YEAR WAS DIFFICULT, BUT THAT'S IN THE PAST. WE WANT TO WIN TITLES AT CITY"



the league with Arsenal and that was an amazing feeling, but this one beats everything because I've seen how this club has changed over three years and how hard everyone has worked to get here.

"It was a risk worth taking. I knew I wanted to come here as a full-time footballer and better myself. I've had very good coaching here and I have developed as a player. I feel we are leading the way in this country now in terms of women's football. The facilities are amazing – I have to pinch myself sometimes. Sometimes in women's football, people say they can make it professional and they can provide this and that, but I believe anything that anybody says at this club because if there's a promise, then nine times out of 10 it will happen." They aren't the only women's team in the City Football Group to have enjoyed success, either – Melbourne City's female side won every game last season. The two sides met for a friendly in Abu Dhabi in February. Man City won 3-0.

Should the men's team win the Premier League title this season, Manchester City would hold both male and female national titles at the same time. "That would be unbelievable," Houghton says, having spent her lunchtime at a Christmas photoshoot with Guardiola and De Bruyne – in early October. No one can say City don't plan ahead.

Houghton believes that the progress of City's women and their many England internationals will benefit Mark Sampson's national team, and the club hope that the work they're doing in youth football will do the same for England men.

Guardiola's presence could help, too, for John Stones and Raheem Sterling at the very least. His ability to improve the players he manages has already had an indirect influence on national teams elsewhere. Guardiola was Barcelona manager when Spain won the World Cup in 2010 and Bayern Munich boss when Germany won it four years later – both sides spearheaded by stars working with him at club level at the time. England for glory in 2018, then?

"Hopefully!" Sterling laughs, tongue slightly in cheek, when *FFT* presents those facts to him. "He's not the national team manager so we can't expect him to win the World Cup for us, but yes, we'll see how that goes!"

In a strange way, Sterling's struggles for England over the summer might be a big part of the reason why he has flourished in the early part of the current campaign. It's obvious from meeting him that he is a shy, sensitive soul; during the first few minutes of his *FFT* photoshoot he says little more than the club's Moonchester mascot, who's contractually mute. It's also obvious from speaking to Sterling that he was deeply hurt by the criticism he received at Euro 2016.

Criticism is something he knows all too well, going back to his decision in 2015 not to extend his Liverpool contract and instead join Manchester City, which didn't go down well on Merseyside.

"It was just about the players that were here," he says when asked why he gave up so much to move to the Etihad. "I could name 10 or 11 who have played at the highest level – people like Sergio Agüero, David Silva and Yaya Toure. For me to develop my game I've got to be playing with the best, and that is why I came here. When I was younger, I could always see this club growing and achieving great things. When I found out that they were interested in signing me, there were no second thoughts. I want to be fighting for trophies consistently for the next 10 years, and there's no better place to do that than here."

Despite his £44m price tag, Sterling wasn't a regular fixture in City's starting XI last season, and he admits he was not entirely happy with his own form as he tried to put the Liverpool furore behind him and settle down at his new club.

"It all came so thick and fast last year that I didn't get much thinking time to myself," he says. "When you sign, you've got to move house, adjust to the city – there was just a lot going on. But I'm not making excuses. This is the job I signed up for and it's the job that I love the most. Maybe last year was a difficult time, but that's all in the past. Now I'm fully settled and fully concentrated."

That's despite Sterling's teething troubles in Manchester during the 2015-16 season being exacerbated by scathing criticism that came his way during England's failure in France, from the stands, social media, television – from pretty much every direction, in fact.

"It wasn't so much Twitter or people in general that bothered me – everyone is entitled to their opinion," he says. Sterling explains that it was the words of the pundits – those who had played for England themselves, who understood the pressures involved and who had always been friendly when he'd met them – that surprised him. "That was a bit weird," he admits. "But it doesn't matter now."

That's because Sterling has learned to shut himself off from it all, even as that criticism has turned to praise in the early months of this season. "I've been told that's the case but I'm not reading any of it any more," he says. "That's what I have to do. I don't know if it's the same for other players, but what I have to do is be myself and be happy around the training ground. That's what matters.

"This summer was my time to think, really. I said to myself that if I come back, work hard and forget what everybody else thinks, I know what I can do – and that's exactly what I want to show.

"We want to be winning titles. The Champions League is the dream for everyone, but we've got to take it step by step. We want to be competing on all fronts, in every competition."



That thirst for trophies is apparent no matter who you speak to within the City Football Group. Despite the fierce competition, Manchester City and everyone involved with them ultimately believe that they can become the biggest club in the world.

"Why not?" Brian Marwood says, repeating that question another three times as he pauses for thought, perhaps aware of the significance of those two words. "I genuinely believe we can, because I believe in the people that work here at every level. I believe that our owners, particularly our chairman, have got a long-term vision and a long-term strategy. I think we have the stability to get to the level that we all hope and want to be at.

"If you look at the great teams that have gone on to achieve Champions League success – they have all had stability both on and off the pitch. This is something that was put in place here eight years ago, and we're still on that journey.

"We're not ashamed to tell people we want to be successful. That's what everybody strives for, right? You want to wake up every morning and be the best that you can possibly be, and you have got to have a passion for that. If you don't, then this probably isn't the right club or right group to be a part of."

FFT's photoshoot with Pep Guardiola nears its inevitable end, but there's time for one more request from our snapper: "Can we just get a picture of you looking up, Pep? Look to the future." The City boss responds by turning his head upwards and breaking into a smile. "The future..." he wonders aloud.

Guardiola isn't the only person at Manchester City smiling about what is still to come – everyone at the Etihad is radiating that same positivity about the months and years ahead. And given everything that is already in place, it isn't hard to see why.



Above Sterling has been restored to his exciting best form by Guardiola's Pep talk **Below** Moonchester the mascot says: "..."

Images PA Images/Stuart Manly Photography




Premier League
Premier League
Premier League
Premier League
Premier League



MAN CITY'S GREATEST EVER MANAGERS

While players tend to grab the headlines, these ten managers have shaped Manchester City's history, making the Blues a prominent fixture in world football

Words Stephen Tudor

What makes a manager great? The most obvious qualification is the winning of trophies, and every one of the Manchester City bosses celebrated here has led their sides to cup final triumphs or league success. Five have managed to do both, while the two most venerated coaches in the club's history can easily fill a cabinet up between them.

Implementing a blueprint for stylish football is another major plus, and again, these revered names can each lay claim to doing this. Spanning vastly different eras, from the start of the 20th century to present day, all ten have made City popular with neutrals, orchestrating attractive and attacking fare that has made their fanbase proud.

Surprisingly, longevity is not such a big consideration, and it is entirely possible for a manager to gain legendary status after just a few years of service. With others largely forgotten after putting in a lengthier stint, it becomes clear that making an impact is key. Quality matters more than quantity.

The final factor has an X attached – a hard-to-define attribute that is usually accompanied by a charismatic personality that rubs off on their teams. After all, winning silverware is all well and good, but don't we all want to be entertained?

In constructing fabulous – and sometimes even flawed – sides, these masterful patrollers of the touchline can take the lion's share of the credit in making Manchester City a prominent presence in English football. That is indeed something to celebrate.

Image Getty Images

LES McDOWALL

1950–1963

McDowall made 129 appearances for City as a player in a career interrupted by World War II before briefly cutting his managerial teeth at Wrexham. In 1950 he returned to Maine Road to take charge of a struggling side relegated to Division Two, and so it was a fine achievement to immediately restore them to the top-flight.

That promotion can be credited as much to the purchasing of Roy Paul – an inspirational half-back, and one of the greatest players to pull on a sky-blue jersey – as to any coaching acumen. Soon after, another pivotal signing arrived in the form of future Leeds and England boss Don Revie.

Inspired by the magnificent Hungary team of Ferenc Puskas and co that outmanoeuvred England at Wembley in 1953, McDowall devised the 'Revie Plan' that employed the forward in a deep-lying role. It was a tactical switch that helped City reach two consecutive FA Cup finals, first losing to Newcastle, before beating Birmingham in the famous encounter that saw keeper Bert Trautmann play on with a broken neck.

In truth, McDowall's 13-year tenure contained as many lows as highs, with City skirting the drop on several occasions. Yet his embracing of tactics, in an era where they were still generally demeaned, rightfully casts him as a man ahead of his time.



Above
McDowall (centre) was inspired by Ferenc Puskas and the Hungarian team of the 1950s



Above
Keegan laps up the applause of the crowd during a league tie against Bolton

KEVIN KEEGAN

2001–2005

Keegan's three-and-a-half-year stint in Manchester was a joyride with the brakes cut, and as ever with the staunch nonconformist, achievements and league standings took a back seat to the breathless nature of his attacking football.

Still, for what it's worth – and it's worth a fair bit – City romped to a Division One title in his inaugural season, with Keegan clearly revitalised after a demoralising spell as England boss. Qualification for the UEFA Cup followed, along with a couple of respectable mid-table finishes in the top-flight. It's pertinent, too, that his reputation attracted some elite talent that elevated the squad.

The quality of football is why he was cherished, however. In that promotion season, Ali Benarbia secured cult status with some magical displays, scheming alongside fellow alchemist Eyal Berkovic, while up front, Shaun Goater and Darren Huckerby scored 58 goals between them. City's Championship rivals were blown away.

In due course, another of Keegan's trademarks manifested itself as disillusioned, he spied the exit door, and in March 2005 left by mutual consent. It was certainly fun while it lasted.



Above
Pellegrini won a number of honours during his time at City

MANUEL PELLEGRINI

2013–2016

The seasoned Chilean was the calm after the storm at City, succeeding the volatile Roberto Mancini, who brought silverware to the club but also a notable amount of discord.

By comparison, Pellegrini was a steady and benign figure, and with harmony restored to the dressing room and players now free to express themselves, City ripped into the 2013-14 campaign with relish. A three-way title fight was won out in free-scoring fashion, with 102 goals scored – 156 across all competitions. There was success too in the League Cup for good measure.

It ensured that the man nicknamed 'The Engineer' became the first coach from outside Europe to win the Premier League, but if his first year in charge was exhilarating, his second proved disappointing. His third and final season meanwhile was overshadowed throughout by the open secret of Pep Guardiola's imminent arrival.

Fair or otherwise, there will always be a question mark over Pellegrini's achievements at the club. How many of the peaks were simply down to unshackling a superbly assembled inherited squad?

Images PA Image /Alamy (McDowall); Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images (Keegan, Pellegrini); Graham Chadwick /Allsport/Getty Images (Royle cutout); Ross Kinnaird /Allsport/Getty Images (Royle main)

"PELLEGRINI BECAME THE FIRST COACH FROM OUTSIDE EUROPE TO WIN THE PREMIER LEAGUE"

JOE ROYLE

1998–2001

Royle arrived too late to prevent City from sliding into the third tier for the first time in their history, and once down in the depths, this popular and experienced manager faced an unenviable task.

His squad was bloated beyond comprehension, with too many failed signings from too many previous managers. Furthermore, how many were up for a weekly scrap, with City viewed as a prized scalp?

An immediate return to what is now the Championship was achieved in the most dramatic manner imaginable, with a two-goal deficit in a play-off final cancelled out in the dying moments, and the momentum from this propelled City to reach the Premier League just 11 months later. A comprehensive final-day victory at Blackburn lives long in every Blue's memory.

Sadly, relegation came next, with Royle ruthlessly dismissed, meaning every one of his three years in the job involved a promotion or the drop. No wonder it was 'Big Joe' who coined the phrase 'Cityitis'. ▸



Above
Royle's time at City certainly wasn't dull

TONY BOOK

1974–1979

Tony Book's destiny always lay in the dugout, having captained City to several major honours during the club's zenith under Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison.

On drawing a veil over a long and distinguished playing career in 1973, he joined the back-room staff, and after a brief and thorny spell as assistant to Ron Saunders, he soon took the reins of a side struggling to begin a new chapter following their recent glories.

Retaining the principles instilled by his mentors, Book set about creating a beautifully balanced new-look team whose mandate was to attack and entertain. With a forward-line containing Peter Barnes, Dennis Tueart and Brian Kidd, fans duly flocked to Maine Road once again.

In 1977, they finished just one point adrift of Liverpool after a season-long battle went to the final game. A year earlier, City won the League Cup, courtesy of a famous acrobatic winner by Tueart. That success made Book the first person to lift the trophy both as a player and manager.

Yet his inclusion here is not only for his modelling of an effervescent team that illuminated the 1970s. On four separate occasions across two decades he stepped in as caretaker boss while 'Skip' played a pivotal role too in the development of a fine crop of youngsters who lifted the FA Youth Cup in the mid 1980s.



Above
Book (right) alongside fellow Manchester City manager, Malcolm Allison

"BOOK SET ABOUT CREATING A BEAUTIFULLY BALANCED NEW-LOOK TEAM"

TOM MALEY

1902–1906

History has been unkind to Maley, a soldier's son who made his name as a player for Hibs and Celtic before becoming one of the first genuinely great managers of the game.

In 1905, football experienced its first major scandal when the FA concluded that Manchester City were paying its players over and above the permitted £4 a week, and though the club admitted guilt, it was widely believed that almost all their rivals were doing likewise. According to the press at the time City were being unjustly punished for two altogether different 'crimes': being northern and successful.

Regardless, Maley was suspended from football for life, a judgement later rescinded, while the fantastic team he helped create was broken up and moved on.

What should not be forgotten is that under Maley's charge City were far and away the most exciting team in the country, winning the FA Cup in 1904 with highly gifted players such as the legendary Billy Meredith, Sandy Turnbull and the prolific Billy Gillespie.

It was a golden era for City, now sadly forever tainted.



Above
The FA Cup-winning side assembled by Maley was later broken up





"FOR MUCH OF HIS TIME AT MAN CITY HE WAS ALSO CLUB SECRETARY"

WILF WILD

1932–1946

Wild does not only hold the distinction of being City's longest-serving manager. For much of his time at the helm, he was also club secretary, doing tasks it is impossible to imagine Guardiola doing today.

One such duty was organising crowd control, which in itself was a highly significant chore, given this was a period when attendances boomed around the country. In March 1934, an astonishing 84,569 fans watched City take on Stoke in an FA Cup game.

The public were flooding to Maine Road to see an ebullient side that contained some glittering stars in the club's historical firmament, from Alec Herd and Matt Busby, to the sublime Irishman Peter Doherty, and Wild's team duly lifted the FA Cup that year, after finishing runners-up just 12 months earlier.

In 1937, they handsomely won the league championship, scoring 107 goals along the way, and they continued their prolificacy the following season, managing to outscore every single one of their peers. Yet staggeringly they somehow found themselves relegated as reigning champions the following year. It could only happen to City.

Top right City's captain Sam Cowan is presented with the FA Cup trophy by King George V in 1934

ROBERTO MANCINI

2009–2013

Furnished with untold wealth following their takeover in 2008, it soon became apparent to the club's hierarchy that simply buying better players would not suffice. What was needed was a manger with a proven winning mentality who furthermore possessed a ruthless streak to finally rid City of their long-standing propensity to be comically erratic. Perhaps down the years they had been too nice?

Step forward Roberto Mancini, who had recently guided Inter Milan to three successive Serie A titles, and for all the success that came with his appointment, City supporters will always point to his touchline dust-up with Sir Alex Ferguson in a crucial title-defining derby as a real watershed moment in their club's fortunes. The established elite were now fair game.

So long, mister nice guys.

It was under Mancini, of course, that City won the league in the most surreal manner possible, claiming their first title for 44 years with a last-gasp strike from Sergio Agüero, while FA Cup success 12 months earlier got their lofty aspiration to dominate the football landscape well underway.



Unfortunately, a ruthless streak coupled with a hot-headed temperament cannot be compartmentalised, and training ground incidents seemed to become commonplace around this time. Eventually, Mancini alienated his players, and with a toxic atmosphere worsening around the Etihad, the chop came when City surprisingly lost to Wigan Athletic in a second FA Cup final. ▸



Above
Mercer on the Wembley pitch ahead of the 1969 FA Cup final

JOE MERCER

1965–1971

'Genial Joe' was already well-known on being appointed City manager after an outstanding playing career saw him win league championships with Everton and Arsenal either side of the war, and individually claim the FWA Footballer of the Year award in 1950.

Following retirement at the age of 39, he began his managerial journey at Sheffield United before putting together a terrific side at Aston Villa nicknamed 'Mercer's Minors' who topped Division Two and lifted the inaugural League Cup. Sadly, a period of ill health then necessitated a year out of the game, with his long convalescence also putting to bed all talk of him being installed as England boss.

On taking charge at City in 1965, Mercer inherited a team languishing in Division Two, but just three years later they were champions of England, with success in both domestic cup competitions and a European Cup Winners' Cup triumph arriving soon after. This remarkable turn-around, however, cannot solely be credited to one of the most dignified and likeable men to ever inhabit a dug-out.

One of his first acts in the job was to bring in Malcolm Allison, a young and enterprising coach, and the manner in which this pair complemented each other was a fundamental reason behind City's rise. Allison was brash and innovative, and looked to the stars. Mercer was the steady hand on the tiller, offering invaluable experience and canny insight.

Together they forged an exciting team that held its own in the annals of English football, with an attacking triumvirate of Colin Bell, Francis Lee and Mike Summerbee that still light up the memories of anyone fortunate enough to witness them.

In the modern era, Guardiola may have outstripped Mercer's trophy haul, but no one is more responsible for elevating City's stature and forever making them a significant and respected football club.



"MERCER INHERITED A TEAM LANGUISHING IN DIVISION TWO. THREE YEARS LATER THEY WERE CHAMPIONS OF ENGLAND"





Above
Guardiola hoists aloft the one prize he most wanted to win during his tenure at City

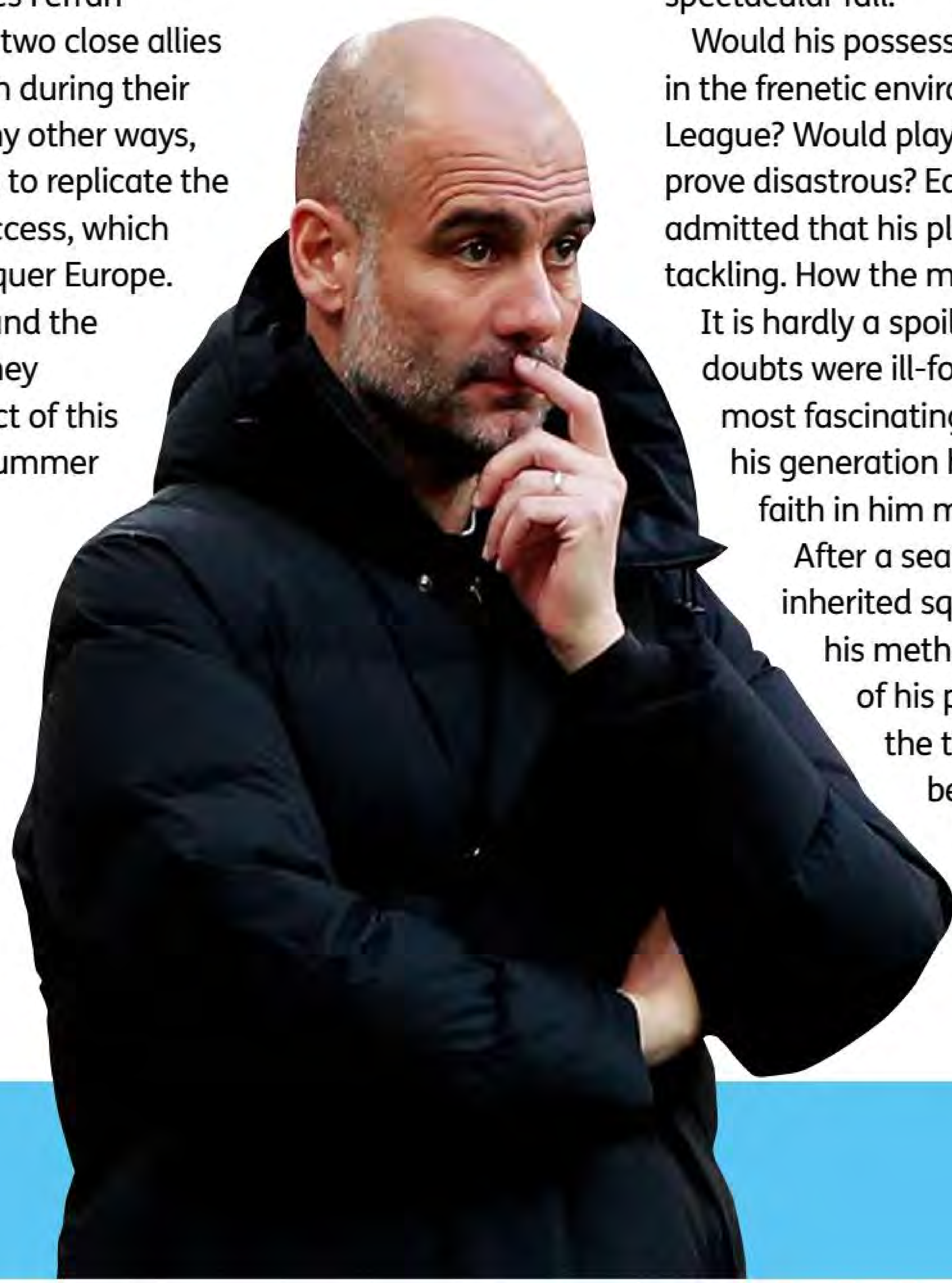
PEP GUARDIOLA

2016–present

"CITY HAVE BAMBOOZLED THE VERY BEST IN RECENT YEARS"

An awful lot was riding on Pep Guardiola being a big success at Manchester City. Several years prior to his arrival, the club had recruited high-level executives Ferran Soriano and Txiki Begiristain, two close allies of the ground-breaking coach during their Barcelona glory days. In many other ways, too, City were clearly seeking to replicate the Catalan giant's model for success, which saw them so beautifully conquer Europe.

With the foundations laid and the building blocks in place, all they needed now was the architect of this sumptuous football. In the summer of 2016, Guardiola was appointed to enormous fanfare and even greater expectation. Yet it would be remiss to forget that while many anticipated the two-time Champions League winner bending English football to his will, just like he had done in La Liga and the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich, others predicted a spectacular fall.



Would his possession-based football cut it in the frenetic environs of the Premier League? Would playing out from the back prove disastrous? Early in his reign, Guardiola admitted that his players never practised tackling. How the media mocked him.

It is hardly a spoiler to reveal that these doubts were ill-founded, and that the most fascinating and inventive coach of his generation has repaid the club's faith in him many times over.

After a season of reshaping his inherited squad and hard-wiring his methodology into the minds of his players, City romped to the title in 2018-19, becoming the first team to get 100 points in the process. Their feat earned them the 'Centurions' moniker.

The following campaign brought another nickname, the 'Fourmidables', thanks to an unprecedented clean sweep of domestic honours. All told, leading up to the club's first-ever Champions League final in 2021, which resulted in a narrow loss to Chelsea, the Blues won ten of the 15 English titles available across four years of dominance. They then rectified that loss to Chelsea by defeating Inter Milan 1-0 to complete a stunning treble in 2023 before going on to win a historic fourth Premier League title in a row in 2024.

If this were not impressive enough, there is also the fantastical nature of the football to consider. Often pushing the boundaries of tactical innovation, City have bamboozled the very best in recent years, with inverted full-backs and false nines entering the lexicon. These creative approaches are now evident throughout the leagues and indeed, not only has Pep made City magical, he has advanced English football for the better.

Images P. Shirley/Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Mercer main); Rawlinson/Mirrorpix/Getty Images (Mercer changing room); Chloe Knott - Danehouse/Getty Images (Guardiola main); Ian Walton - Pool/Getty Images (Guardiola cutout), Craig Mercer/MB Media/Getty Image (trophy)



Images Shamil Tanna/FourFourTwo

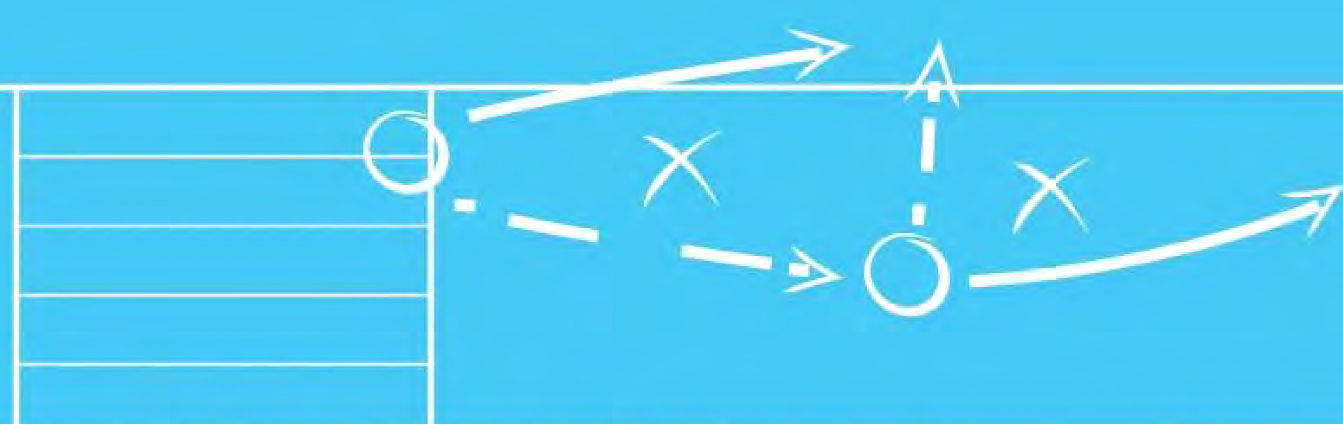
PEP

MY BLUEPRINT

He's widely regarded as the most innovative coach in Europe, and in 2016 FourFourTwo explored precisely what Manchester City fans would be able to expect from Bayern Munich's notorious perfectionist

Words Andrew Murray

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
MARCH 2016



HE DEMANDS TOTAL CONTROL

Never question Guardiola's authority. This is a man who needs to feel loved, from the boardroom to the training pitch, if he is to bring his revolution to your football club.

Though he struggled with the workload of being Barcelona's de facto spokesman under fiery president Joan Laporta, Guardiola's support for the man who gave him his big coaching break with the B team was ceaseless. When Sandro Rosell replaced Laporta in early 2010, the alienation that followed played a significant part in Pep leaving Barça at the end of 2011-12 for his New York sabbatical.

At Bayern, the rows between Guardiola and long-term doctor Hans-Wilhelm Muller-Wohlfahrt ended in the latter's resignation (after 38 years with the club) at the continued implication that he was responsible for Die Roten's frequent injuries.

Before his imprisonment for tax evasion, ex-Bayern president Uli Hoeness had lunch with Guardiola nearly every day, the pair swapping stories over plates of rostbratwurst sausages. Though Guardiola and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, a confirmed Pep devotee, frequently share a coffee, the pair's relationship cooled after the chief executive suggested during July 2015's tour to China that the club would survive without their leader.

That said, Guardiola is aware enough not to remodel an entire squad. Rumours abounded that he wanted to ship out Gerard Pique and Dani Alves, among others, in his final Barcelona season. In the end, he fell on his own sword.

Support him, give him what he wants, or Pep walks away.

HE'S TACTICALLY FLEXIBLE...

... and he expects the same from his players. Why? Because Guardiola has understood the most complex tactical instructions since his teens.

"Now you're going to play as a false winger," the former head of La Masia, Oriol Tort, told the 13-year-old with his team trailing 1-0 at half-time to minnows Carmel – not the easiest idea for a skinny central midfielder to process. However, Guardiola drifted into the vacant space between the centre circle and his winger.

"We won 3-1 and I touched the ball more in 15 minutes than in an entire half," he wrote in his out-of-print 2001 autobiography La Meva Gent, El Meu Futbol ('My People, My Football', pictured right). "Just by moving two paces I could radically change the game's rhythm. Tort knows more about football than those who invented it."

If a 13-year-old can do it...



COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Put simply, Guardiola loves talking about football. It's a process that begins the first time he meets his players, continues throughout every training session ("He interjects all the time to correct and explain exactly what he wants from us," recalled Dani Alves of Pep's early days at Barcelona) and even extends to individual chats every day. Praise is effusive when merited.

Guardiola typically spends two hours per day discussing one-on-one the positional minutiae of what he demands from his players. Entirely self-taught as a player, Jerome Boateng (below) has been the biggest beneficiary at Bayern Munich, adding brains to his prodigious centre-back brawn, while Philipp Lahm still spends 15 minutes after every training session talking in minute detail about midfield play, his hands a blur of explanatory signals. For more instinctive players such as Franck Ribery, less is more.

"Pep doesn't just give you orders," said Gerard Pique. "He also explains why."

He knows his players intimately. He cried with youngster Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg when the midfielder lost his father to stomach cancer in April 2014. He wants a maximum of 20 players in a first-team squad because he hates telling anyone that they have failed to make the 18-man matchday squad.

He varies what he says, too, not through any kind of psychological plan but merely to express exactly what he is feeling inside. "Guys, you're all greats," he told his Barcelona players before 2010's title-decider against Villarreal, which came two days after Champions League semi-final defeat to Jose Mourinho's Inter Milan. "I just want to tell you one thing. If we go out there and lose, and the league escapes us, don't worry." They won. 4-0.

Image PA Images/Getty Images



HE BUILDS AROUND A CONDUCTOR

At Barcelona it was Sergio Busquets; occasionally Xavi or Andres Iniesta. For Bayern, Thiago Alcantara, Xabi Alonso and Philipp Lahm have performed the role. In every game, Guardiola picks his avatar – the player whose job is to keep the play moving, as he did.

In his 2001 autobiography he wrote: "[Ex-Barça boss Johan] Cruyff used to tell me that if I was fouled, it was my own fault because I'd held onto [the ball] too long; I had to let it go much before."

Yet Guardiola also demands what he calls "players with a pause". Capable of holding onto the ball for half a second longer than your average midfield clogger, they lull the opposition into a positional error. He did it better than most himself. "I tried to trick the opposition into thinking I'd pass it wide again," he says in 2014's *Pep Confidential*, Marti Perarnau's account of Guardiola's first season at Bayern, "and then – boom! – I'd split them with an inside pass to a striker."

It was this understanding that prompted his decision to play Lahm (right) in midfield instead of his customary full-back position.

"He is super-intelligent," Guardiola has said of his elegant captain. "He understands the game brilliantly; knows when to come inside or stay wide. The guy is f**king exceptional."

In short, Lahm is his organising midfielder, the fulcrum around which the whole team moves. Only the most intelligent players can pull off this difficult role, which demands one player that does everything that both holding midfielders do – the ball retention, positioning and intercepting – in the 4-2-3-1 setup that Guardiola seldom uses because it's not attacking enough.

When he really wants total domination of the ball, he chooses his former Barcelona protégé Thiago as conductor, the player he demanded *oder nichts* ("or no one") when he took over from Jupp Heynckes in 2013.

"The basis is there: maintaining possession and playing the ball out from the back," Thiago explains to *FourFourTwo*, comparing Guardiola's two teams. "Of course, every team is different, but any Pep team is always going to be based on ball retention. It's his mentality."



Busquets became Pep's conductor at Barcelona

Images PA Images/Getty Images

32 mins

Talk of Guardiola's intensity is nothing new. He dedicates nearly every waking hour to planning his training sessions, coming up with tactical schemes and studying potential signings and upcoming opponents. Only by completely immersing himself in how his team will play, how his players will interact on the pitch, does he feel able to perform at his best.

His personal assistant Manel Estiarte (see overleaf) calls it 'The Law of 32 Minutes'. It's the period of time Guardiola can disconnect from football before thoughts return to the beautiful game. Sometimes he has to be told to go out for a meal, or go home to play with his children Maria, Marius and Valentina. Then, after half an hour, he will either shut himself back in his office or his mind will drift.

Estiarte expounds his law in *Pep Confidential*, saying: "He starts staring at the ceiling, and although he's nodding as if he's listening, he's probably thinking about the opposition left-back."

DEFENSIVE STRUCTURE IS PARAMOUNT

Pep's free-flowing philosophy may be what draws in the casual observer, but he dedicates more training sessions to defensive organisation than anything else. It shows: before the 2015-16 winter break Bayern had conceded only 49 goals in 85 Bundesliga games since he arrived, keeping 50 clean sheets.

"Attack is more based on innate talent," he once said. "Defence is about the work you put into it. Defensive strategy is absolutely essential if I want to attack a lot."

Bayern's Javi Martinez has virtually had to learn how to walk again, ditching the man-marking system he knew as a centre-back at Athletic for Guardiola's more fluid zonal system. For six months, the Sabener Strasse training ground echoed with shouts (always in Spanish) of "Javi, go forwards!"; "No, not now, Javi!!"; "Javi, look at Dante!"

Yet the sessions worked. Martinez is now transformed from prosaic midfield anchor into one of the best defenders in Europe, and he is crucial to the Pep plan.

"We've done so much tactical work," says Martinez. "He has shown me 200 videos and taught me concepts: when to move out with the ball, when to mark, where to position myself. He has an idea and knows how to teach it every session. He's incredible."

What Guardiola wants above all else is a defence that moves as one – a self-contained organism that suffocates opposition attacks by pressing high. If the centre-back presses, the midfield conductor drops in behind to cover; similarly, the winger covers his full-back. On average, his Bayern defend seven metres further up the pitch than they did under Heynckes. It's a proactive sort of defending that can be achieved only by religious practice that begins against no opposition, to first learn the necessary movements.

But Guardiola's defensive strategy doesn't end when his team have the ball. Moving gradually up the pitch, to give the conductor full orchestral scope, Guardiola wants his team to complete 15 passes, the theory being that his players retain their shape, while destabilising their opponents. It is a defensive tactic as much as it is a transition to attack via gradual strangulation, because done effectively it prevents the chasing opposition from counter-attacking.

What he can't abide, however, is when these 15 passes don't go anywhere...



"OK, Javi, let's just go through this another 199 times"

"PEP HAS AN IDEA AND KNOWS HOW TO TEACH IT IN EVERY SESSION. HE IS INCREDIBLE"

HE HATES TIKI-TAKA

Yes, really. The concept most associated with his blueprint is the former Barcelona coach's biggest bugbear.

"Tiki-taka is a load of s**t – a made-up term," he has often repeated of the initially pejorative phrase first coined by pundit Javier Clemente after watching Spain's sterile possession game against Tunisia at the 2006 World Cup. "It means passing the ball for the sake of passing, with no real aim or aggression – nothing. I will not allow my brilliant players to fall for all that rubbish."

Many seek to emulate Pep's style, but see possession as the objective in itself, turning an attacking philosophy based around constant movement and freedom into a stodgy, passive hope of reaching the opposition box. Teams copy it, but badly, failing to appreciate the hours of work that have gone into creating the space to attack.

At Barcelona, Guardiola's strategy was long entrenched. Coming to English football, he will have to adapt to his new players and coach them constantly in the first six months for them to fully grasp the system's complexity, in the same way he did at Bayern. Maximum intensity is demanded at all times, because, Guardiola believes, that is the only way to train his players' muscles in the football-specific movements that define his attacking remit.

The cornerstone is the *rondo* (Diagram A on the right), a piggy-in-the-middle drill that begins every training session. The ball flies around at speed, which helps to sharpen technique in tight areas, with the goal being to reach 30 touches, the eight players counting out loud as they go. If you lose the ball, you go in the middle as punishment.

A variation on the *rondo* adds an extra element. The drill is 4v4 with another three 'neutral' players who play for whichever side has possession, making the game effectively 7v4 (B, right). Crucially, however, as soon as possession is turned over, the team who lost the ball can then immediately counter-press to win it back. The effect is two-fold: it establishes the importance of being alive to the counter-press having just lost possession, and the team with the ball learn how to position themselves and engineer space.

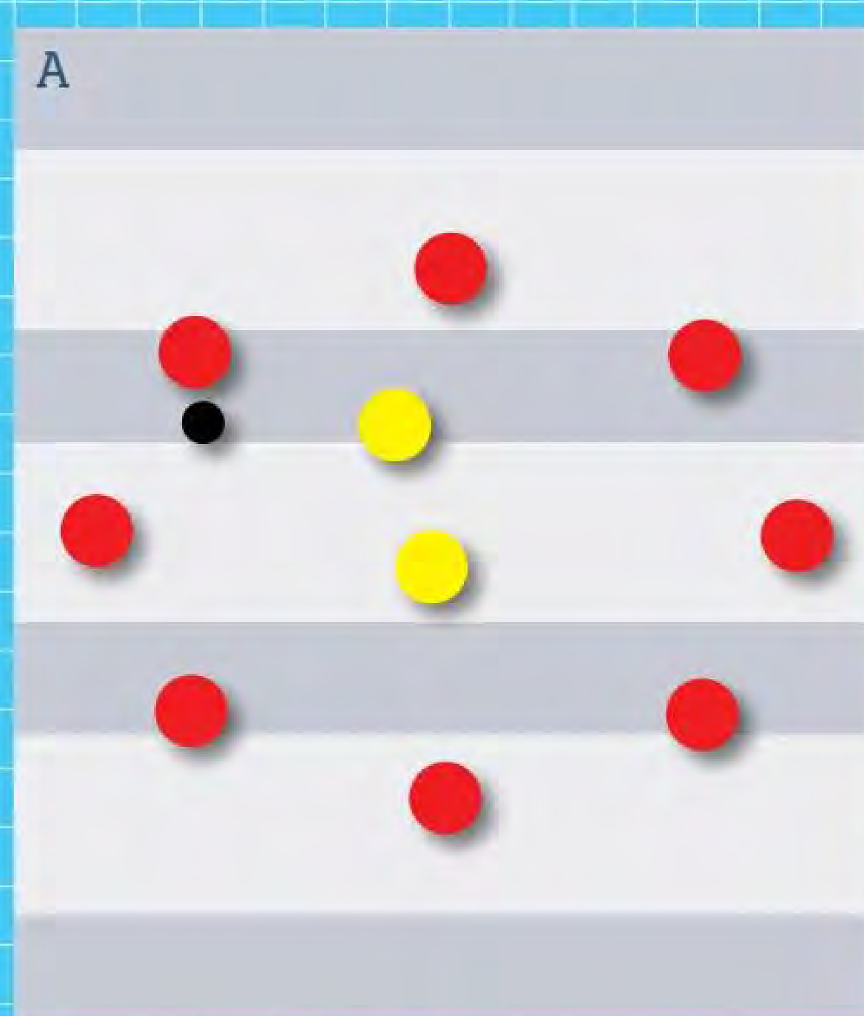
"The secret is to overload one side of the pitch so the opponent must tilt its own defence to cope," Guardiola says in *Pep Confidential*. "When you've done that, we attack and score from the other side. That's why you have to pass the ball with a clear intention. Draw in the opponent, then hit them with the sucker punch."

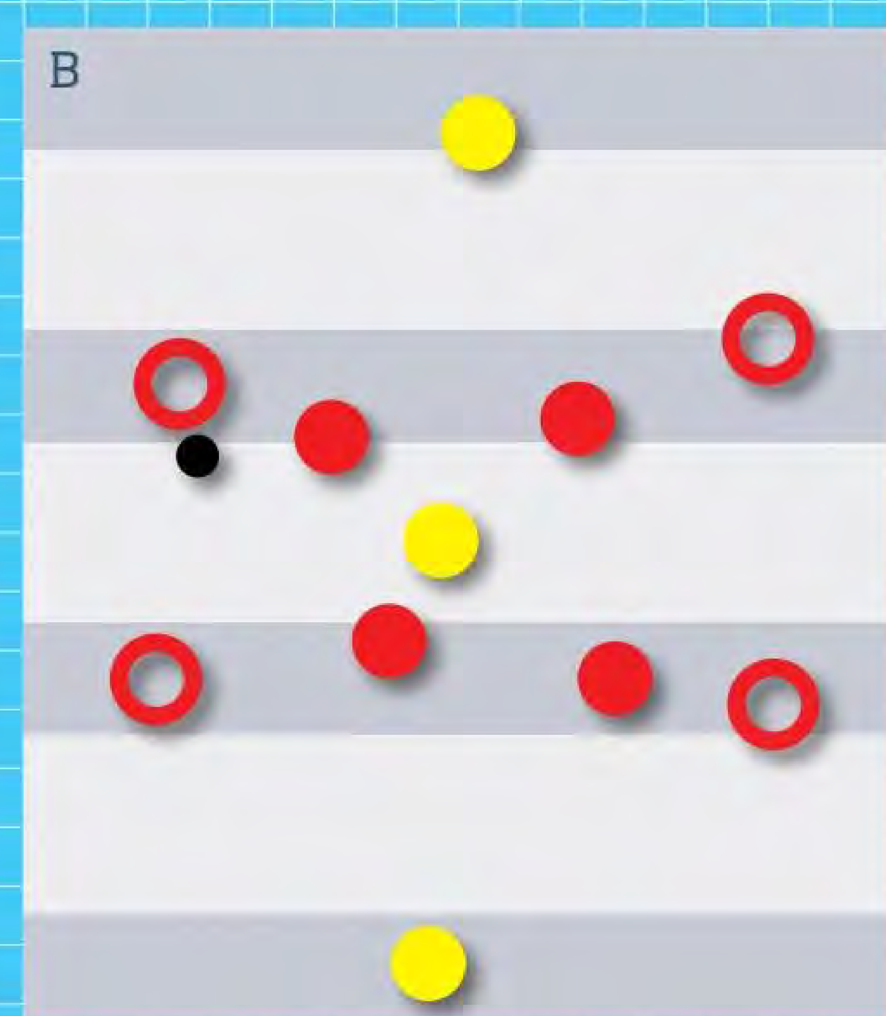
To reach that point, however, players must develop their fitness levels. Pre-season double sessions were the norm at Bayern – by the beginning of October in 2013-14, Pep's first season with the club, Die Roten had done 100 sessions – and everything happens with a ball. Just running is pointless.

"We train with maximum intensity," he has said. "Even the *rondos*: it's with 100 per cent effort or you don't do them at all. If the players don't like them then they are welcome to go mountain running, but in that case we'll never reach our potential."

Circuit sessions with fitness coach Lorenzo Buenaventura are constant in the early days. Lesson plans from Guardiola's 2007-08 title-winning season as Barça B coach are available online. The complexity of the 40-minute circuits is mind-blowing, arrows flying everywhere – jumps over hurdles, in and out of cones, followed by shots at goal.


Images Getty Images







Guardiola talking tactics at Bayern

Images Getty Images

PEP'S ENTOURAGE

Coming together at Barcelona, Guardiola's now-established team followed him to Bavaria

DOMENEC TORRENT
Assistant coach

At Guardiola's side since 2007, Torrent has evolved from doing scouting for Barcelona B to becoming assistant coach at Bayern Munich. Torrent stayed in the Catalan capital a year longer than Guardiola, who eventually persuaded him to move to Germany as his second-in-command.

Never without an iPad on the bench, Torrent is credited with convincing Guardiola to play erstwhile full-back Philipp Lahm as a central midfielder for the first time in an official game (the 2013 UEFA Super Cup against Chelsea).

"All the pieces fell together with that decision," Guardiola later said. "If we win anything, it's because of that."

MANEL ESTIARTE
Personal assistant

One of the finest water polo players of all time (he's known as the sport's Maradona), Estiarte met Guardiola during the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and they've been firm friends ever since. He was head of external relations at Barça, and joined Bayern Munich as Pep's personal assistant.

Before the shootout in the 2013 UEFA Super Cup, Guardiola used Estiarte's water polo prowess to inspire victory over Jose Mourinho's Chelsea. "He's the best penalty-taker in the world," Pep told his players. "I've learned two things from Manel: don't change your mind, and believe you're going to score." No Bayern player missed.

LORENZO BUENAVENTURA
Fitness coach

Without Buenaventura's training ground exercises, the Guardiola coaching model would fall apart.

Buenaventura is a disciple of Paco Seirul-lo, the fitness coach for Johan Cruyff's Barcelona, who tutored Guardiola in the late '80s, and he passionately shares the Bayern boss' belief that all training exercises must be carried out with a ball, at maximum intensity, for their ceaseless attacking model to properly function.

In short, Buenaventura is the brains behind training – which, in many ways, makes him the brains behind the entire Guardiola backroom operation.

CARLES PLANCHART
Head of analysis

Planchart arrived in Munich at the same time as Torrent, providing the Bundesliga champions with in-game analysis of Bayern's patterns of play from the stands to Torrent's iPad. Guardiola, Torrent and Planchart then feed this into the half-time team talk.

But it is his forensic dossiers on upcoming opponents that Guardiola appreciates most. Frequently working two weeks ahead of himself, Planchart and his team review the opposition's previous six matches, with 50-60 bite-size moves adding further detail.

Planchart's work is available the day after the previous game and shapes training for the following week.



HE'S A TACTICAL INNOVATOR

Guardiola is swift to dismiss formations as "meaningless" and, partly explaining the fluidity and flexibility with which he alters a team's structure.

Born from meticulous analysis building up to a game – Guardiola watches the opposition's previous six matches, plus targeted highlights – he'll get a 'Eureka moment' that crystallises how his team will win. "It's the moment that my job becomes truly meaningful," he has said.

Using Messi as a false nine for only the second time, in the May 2009 Clasico, is his most famous innovation. The night before the match, he called Messi into his Camp Nou office at 10.30pm to show the Flea the exact areas he could exploit.

Guardiola's use of a back three stems from his desire to achieve numerical superiority. At Barça, Pique brought the ball out from the back to blur the lines between defence and midfield; at Bayern, it is Jerome Boateng.

"I'm no innovator," Guardiola has said. "I'm an ideas thief." It's true the influence of Cruyff's Barcelona and Louis van Gaal's Ajax are undeniable, but few have the stones to employ such radical concepts in huge games.



"I know what your shirt says, but you're a false nine now"

Images PA Images/Getty Images

INTERIORES ARE HIS KEY PERFORMERS

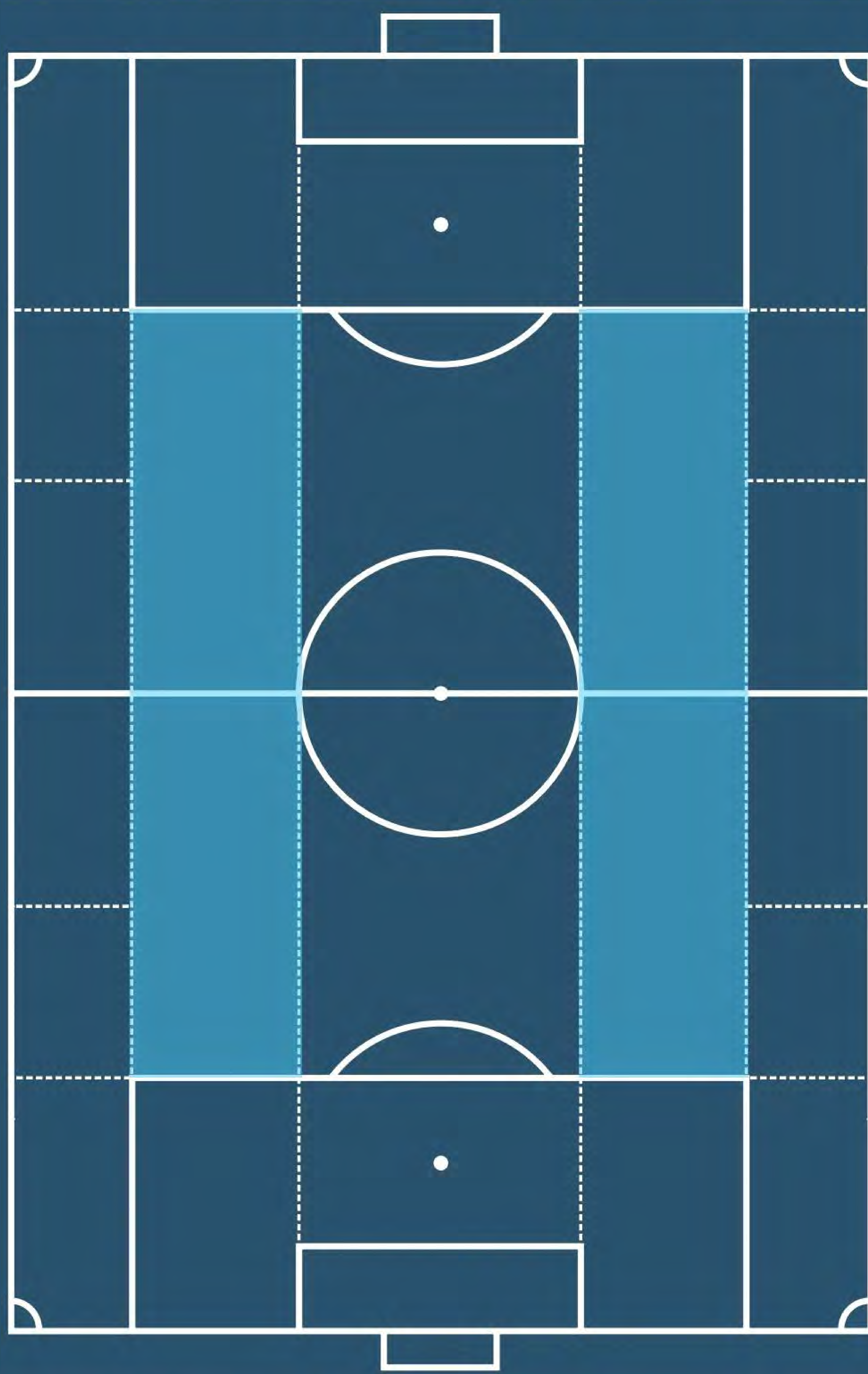
Whether it's Barcelona's twice Champions League-winning 4-3-3 or Bayern's evolution on a theme, one constant remains in Guardiola's arsenal: the need to deliver the ball to his best players, in as much space as possible, in the inside channels.

In Catalonia it was Xavi and Iniesta. In Bavaria it is Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery. The first two are classic Spanish *interiores*: central midfielders who operate in the channel between full-back and centre-back, and load the Messi bullets. In contrast, Robben and Ribery are wingers, who cut inside to occupy the interior space. In Germany they call it *halbraum*, or 'half-spaces'.

To achieve this, Guardiola has a training pitch marked out very specifically for practice matches (see right): five vertical and four crossfield sections, of which two are subdivided in the wide areas. The two inside channels (shaded pale blue) are where he wants his best players in possession because they fall between all lines of the opponent's defensive structure.

These aren't mere guidelines or ideal scenarios. There are rules: no more than three players in any horizontal zone; no more than two players in any vertical zone. For example, if Ribery cuts in from the left wing, left-back David Alaba should overlap (below). To cover Alaba, a central midfielder should drop to the left. If a rule is broken in training, Guardiola interjects, because it denies his most important players space.

"This happens every f**king game!" he screamed during a training session in Doha in 2014, the YouTube video of which went viral. You wouldn't like Pep when he's angry.





"HE'S OFTEN A SARCASTIC JOKER"

Meet Marti Perarnau, the author who got up close and personal with Pep at Bayern

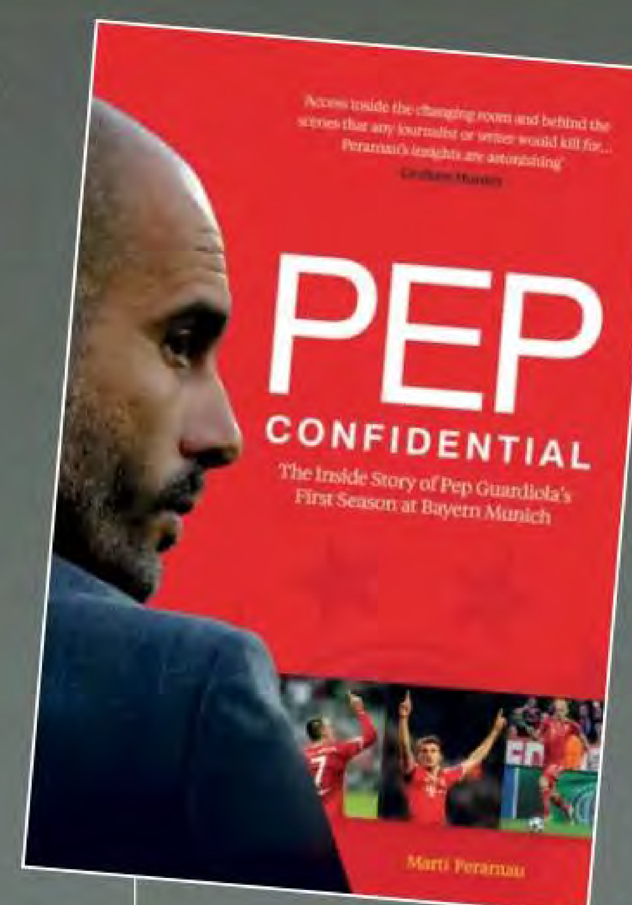
You've spent more time with Guardiola than anyone outside his closest circle. What's he like?
There's very little that is special about him. He's just very normal and unassuming. As a coach, he's very famous, and some of what you see publically is to protect himself and his family. The perception is that because he's such a great coach, there must be something different to him, but that's not really the case. He's very humble and always deals with problems personally. The special quality he has is in how he interprets football – he understands it like no one else.

Does he ever stop thinking about the sport?
He does, but the majority of his day-to-day life is dedicated to football. He's obsessive in the sense that he constantly applies theories and things he reads to football in order to become better. His mentality is to learn. He likes knowing new things. It's why he went from Barcelona to New York, to Munich and next, to England. He jokes about only wanting to see the restaurants, but it is all to learn. He meets new people, learns about new cultures and how to then incorporate those cultures into his coaching. That is why he went to the concentration camp at Dachau. It will be the same case in England, too. He's a better coach now than before he went to work in Germany because of it.

How does he deal with defeats?
They affect him more than other coaches, because he so rarely loses matches. He blamed himself for the Champions League semi-final defeat to Real Madrid in 2014. He really hurt – it took him days to get over it. He's always with his coaches analysing the 'why?'. He tries not to get too carried away with victories, nor too down after tough defeats. There's no depression there.

What is his sense of humour like? Does he have one?
He's a real joker with his players. At the beginning they didn't understand his ways at Bayern. He can be quite sarcastic and they thought he was being serious. He's always tapping players on the arse, or giving them a playful slap around the head. It shocked them a bit. Pep's really tactile, with hugs, even kisses. He is very Latin in that sense.

Will the press be a problem?
He doesn't give one-on-one interviews, apart from obligatory ones for rights holders, but you can ask him anything at a press conference. Sections of the German press didn't warm to him, but that's life. You've got four chances to speak to him – before and after matches, assuming there are two per week – and he will talk without limits. He loves talking about football, his philosophy and his team.



How was your year living so close to him?
I didn't know him before Munich. It was amazing to be so close to such a brilliant coach teaching a team a totally new way. They're masters at it now. I had doubts at the beginning, but Lahm, Robben and Ribery want to learn. Trying to figure out what Pep is trying to do wasn't easy for them – imagine what it was like for me!



NUTRITION IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

To be an elite footballer, you need to eat like one. Hardly revolutionary, but when Guardiola saw pastries and cakes laid out for the team during his first pre-season at Bayern, he called for a nutritionist.

Eating the meal provided in the players' lounge is compulsory. When only four players did so after a Bundesliga game against Nuremberg in August 2013, Guardiola spat at his squad: "I won't ask again. You must eat within an hour of the match and since you're all professionals playing at the highest level I trust that you will do it from now on."



THERE'S NO ROOM FOR ROMANTICISM

Don't ever confuse Pep Guardiola for a style-over-substance aesthete. Unsurprisingly for someone who has won 19 trophies in seven and a half seasons as a top-flight coach, he wants to win.

At the centre of everything, however, is the desire to win with style. Ultimately, Guardiola chose Bayern as his next club after Barcelona – where he wants to one day return, to head up La Masia – because he wanted to prove he could advance on the 'perfection' that former coach Jupp Heynckes had left. Before joining Bayern, he researched every Bundesliga club to understand how they counter-attacked, but all the hours spent studying videos, talking to his players and analysing every detail is pointless if he doesn't win.

Thiago agrees. "It's a great mix: you know how he wants you to play and how to combine that with your own qualities. That's how good results follow.

The players will end up drained by Pep. He's so intense, he'll exhaust us."

THE THIRD MAN IS CRUCIAL

The other way Guardiola provides space for his *interiores* is by maintaining width. If play develops down the right wing, the opposite wideman must hug the left-hand touchline to avoid overpopulating central midfield and denying Iniesta, Robben or Ribery the space to play.

"Guys who are supposed to play on the right are not allowed to cross to the left, and on the left you're not allowed to cross to the right," former Barcelona forward Thierry Henry (below) recently recalled on Sky Sports' *Monday Night Football*.



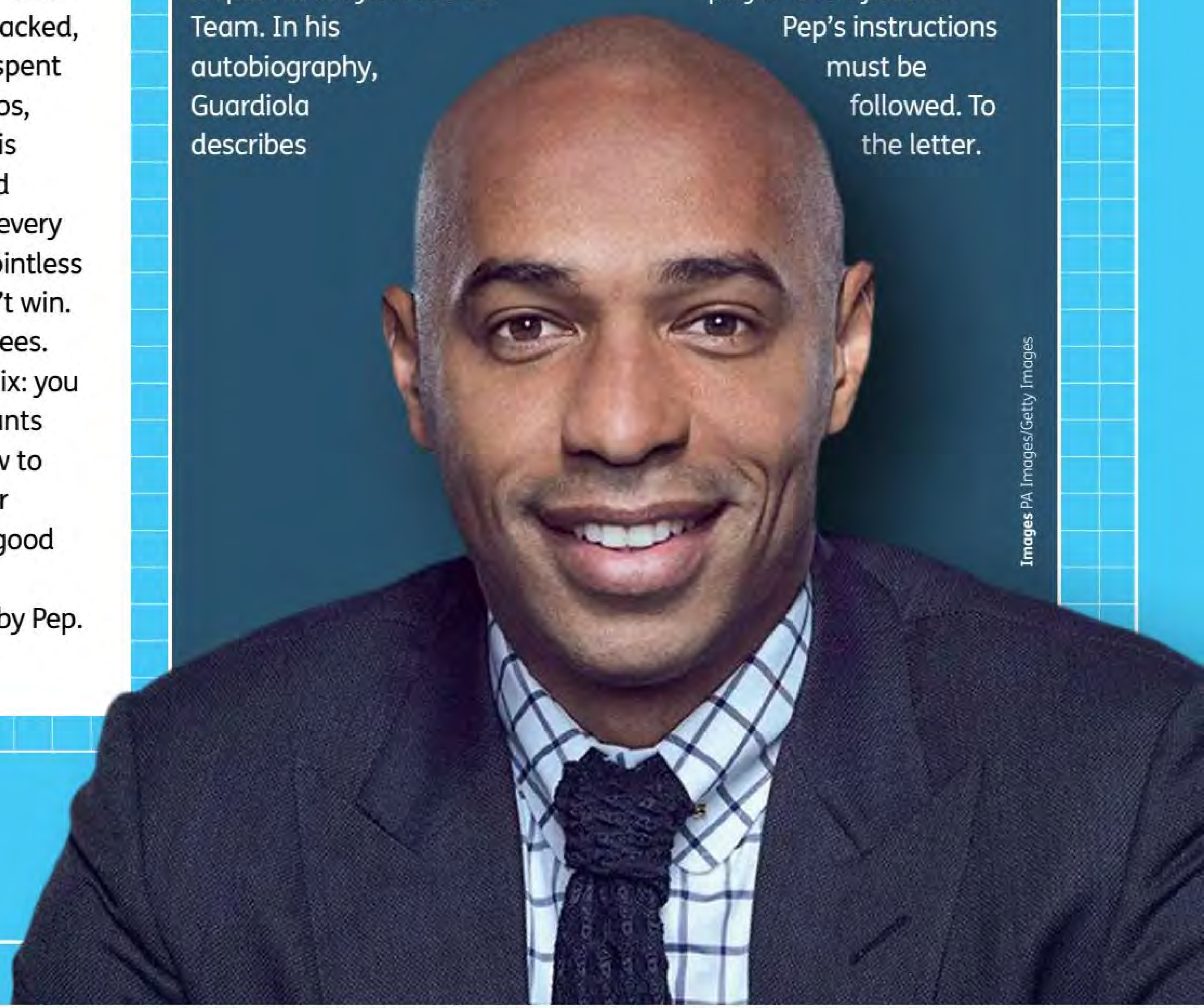
It's what Guardiola calls "the third man" and is an extension of a *rondo* variation to escape counter-pressing – wait for the moment to switch the play to the opposite wing and change the reference point of the attack. It's why Xabi Alonso, with his range of passing, has become so vital to the Bayern system, whether he's in defence or his natural holding midfield role.

It's a system Pep learned as part of Cruyff's Dream Team. In his autobiography, Guardiola describes the limit and with the wingers".

There is scope for improvisation, however. Once in the final third, Guardiola's players are allowed total freedom to move as they see fit to score. Messi could seek space. Ditto Thomas Muller, that 'space investigator', or Robert Lewandowski. Henry added: "He used to say: 'My job is to bring you to the last third; your job is to finish it'. The last third was freedom for us. But if you don't do what he is asking you to do, you are going to be in trouble. When Pep has a plan, respect his plan."

The Frenchman knows this from experience. In 2008, frustrated at not touching the ball much in the first half of a 5-2 Champions League win in Portugal against Sporting, Henry vacated his left-wing berth to look for it.

"I could hear him being upset on the side, but I still went there – I didn't care," admitted Henry. "I scored a goal, and at half-time he took me off." Every player has a job and Pep's instructions must be followed. To the letter.



Images PA Images/Getty Images

YOU HAVE TO BUY INTO PEP

Much is made of Pep's Barça-ball style, yet he has clearly adapted to Bayern's strengths out wide, encouraging crossfield balls for Robben and Ribery. "I'm not some kind of Taliban; I'm not totally inflexible," he says in *Pep Confidential*. "I'm happy to evolve. But please don't ask me to do something I don't believe in." And if you don't do what he believes in, you'll find yourself discarded.

Guardiola will not bend over backwards to accommodate a player who won't adapt to his requirements in the same way that Pep adapts for the team. Javi Martinez has evolved to great effect; ditto captain Lahm and star man Ribery. "I love you, Pep," the French winger told him in 2014. "I'm just a street kid, but you will always be in my heart."

Yet he struggles to manage players with a singularity of personality. Samuel Eto'o, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Mario Mandzukic have all lasted just one season under Guardiola. The latter's sulking when out of the team was a particular annoyance to him. It's no coincidence that these three are driven centre-forwards with more than a dash of ego, who define themselves by goals.

"Guardiola disappointed me because he didn't treat me with respect; it was twice as good when Jupp Heynckes was there," said Mandzukic, who joined Atletico Madrid at the end of the Spaniard's first season at the Allianz Arena. Eto'o and Ibra have also cited a lack respect.

Guardiola's preference for a false nine may not help, but Robert Lewandowski's 48 goals in his first 75 Bayern games is proof that if you're willing to adapt, Pep will change his tactics for you.

On the day Douglas Costa arrived at Bayern from Shakhtar Donetsk, his new coach asked him: "Are you ready to open your mind and learn how to play football?" Frequently used in an unfamiliar left-wing position, the Brazilian had scored five goals and assisted a further 12 by the winter break. He'd learned well. One wonders whether Premier League stars, used to prioritising physique over tactical mastery, will be able to follow suit.



HE'S A RISK-TAKER

Guardiola's belief in his own ideas, however well founded, can be his biggest downfall. When Guardiola introduced 3-4-3 to Barcelona in 2011-12, with mixed results, he wanted to challenge a team that had already won everything. Unfamiliar with the system, Los Cules lost the league to Mourinho's Real Madrid and exited the Champions League to Chelsea in the last four.

When presented with two possible options, he always chooses the more attacking one ("Pep would rather die going forward than stay alive defending," Thierry Henry once said of his former coach). There is much to admire in this. But in Bayern's biggest games in the last two and a half seasons, the coach's master plan went badly wrong.

First, there was the 2014 Champions League semi-final. Trailing 1-0 from the first leg, a 4-2-3-1-shaped Bayern side surrended midfield superiority of the ball in favour of four out-and-out-attackers (Robben, Ribery and Thomas Muller pushed high, with Mandzukic as centre-forward) and lost 4-0 at home to Real Madrid.

Twelve months on, question marks were again raised over Guardiola's daring after he selected a back three (Boateng, Rafinha, Medhi Benatia) to face Barcelona's fearsome attacking trident of Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez. "Pep Guardiola is probably the only coach in world football who would do this away at the Nou Camp," said commentator Gary Neville. "Everyone else would be thinking: 'How do we double-up on them, or protect, or screen?'"

After 20 minutes of a Barça barrage, he had to change to a back four. Bayern lost 3-0, and the tie was effectively over. So often does the risk-reward football work, he possibly gets too clever for his own good. This would see him come unstuck in the Premier League furnace.

HE'S OBSESSED WITH ROUTINE

Nothing is left to chance. The same long-established process is followed religiously in preparation for each fixture. Such preparation serves to calm the 44-year-old coach's pre-game nerves.

Two days before every game, Guardiola and his assistant will analyse the data and videos on the next opponents, shutting themselves in their respective training ground offices so that their thoughts are not contaminated by each other. Guardiola then plans. Alone. For hours.

There are three pre-game team talks. The first, at training the day before the match, will outline the video analysis results, with the session that follows focusing on how they're to be countered. The second, on the morning of the game, details defensive and attacking set-pieces. Finally, two hours before kick-off, Guardiola's focus will be entirely on attacking strategy and motivation.

Perhaps surprisingly, he never enters the team dressing room before the game, believing it to be the players' domain.

There is a routine to his in-game life, too, all hand signals and shouts of encouragement while up in the stands, head of analysis Planchart will send images of specific moves down to Torrent's iPad on the bench. Half-time is the one and only occasion that Guardiola enters the dressing room before or during the game.

Post-match is when he is at his most relaxed. He's chatty, amiable and will wander round the players' lounge talking about what he's just witnessed to anyone who'll listen. He has been known, as the adrenaline exits his system, to steal the odd bit of food from his players' plates, before gorging himself later. Then it's back to the training pitch and more preparation.

HE'S HIS OWN BIGGEST CRITIC

"Pep will never be satisfied," his midfield metronome Thiago once said. "He'll never enjoy football because he's always looking for what has gone wrong in order to correct it. Pep is never happy. He's a perfectionist."

Maybe it's because losing is something that happens so rarely to Guardiola, but nowhere does the weight of defeat fall heavier than on his own shoulders.

The 4-0 loss to Real is his biggest regret in football, because he changed his mind from employing a back three that would make them capable of overloading Los Blancos' midfield to a front four who were isolated.

Rest assured, in the Premier League the critics will come. English football tends to have an inherent mistrust of the new. But they won't be more critical than Pep is of himself.

It's the product of the hours of planning that came before. If you're as obsessed with football as Pep is, you'd be the same. "All I do is look at the footage of our opponents," he says, "then try to work out how to demolish them."





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WE DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY HERE

Pep may have conquered all in Spain and Germany so far, but English football presents some unique challenges

"Football, football, football"

It took just three months for Jurgen Klopp to understand what the English game is all about: football, and lots of it. Even a manager as well prepared as the German didn't realise there are replays in the FA Cup and two legs in the League Cup semi-final. Guardiola will be spending more time pitchside than ever before.

It's all in the mind

Guardiola, meet Pardiola. The Premier League may have lost Alex Ferguson and Jose Mourinho (for now), but there's no shortage of mind-games masters, from Sam Allardyce to Alan Pardew. Don't get drawn in, Pep – that's what they want.

Beware of the media

Louis van Gaal is as experienced as they come but he still allowed the English media to get to him, even to the point of storming out of a press conference. As a manager who craved increased training-ground privacy at Barcelona and Bayern, and doesn't do one-on-one interviews, Pep may find there's no place to hide in the Premier League goldfish bowl.

A winter of discontent

Apart from Israel, every UEFA country outside Britain has a winter break, and it's something Guardiola will be accustomed to from his time in Spain (where they break for two weeks) and Germany (four). Sorry, señor, but Leicester's nothing like Qatar.

There are no easy games, Jeff

The cliché has had a rebirth this season, with a new TV deal giving the Premier League's smaller clubs budgets comparable to only the biggest teams in mainland Europe. "After we beat Arsenal, Liverpool and Man City away, people are expecting us to beat Norwich 6-0," explained West Ham boss Slaven Bilic in September. "It doesn't happen like that." Indeed it doesn't – they drew 2-2. There are far fewer whipping boys in England than Spain and Germany.

Stoke on a wet and windy Tuesday

It was Andy Gray who suggested that, as great as Guardiola's Barça were, they'd struggle on a wet, windy night in the Potteries. Stoke may be undergoing an image change, but a visit to the Premier League's coldest and second-noisiest ground (according to a study last season) remains the acid test of a team's title credentials. Can Pep pass it?

"THAT MORNING AS I WOKE UP AND LOOKED I'M GOING TO DO



In May 2019, Vincent Kompany ended an 11-year association with Manchester City by scoring a stunning winner against Leicester, to effectively clinch the Premier League title for his beloved club. In his own words, he shares everything about that night, hunting down Liverpool and ignoring İlkay Gündoğan...

Interview Leo Moynihan

OUT OF MY WINDOW, I HAD THIS THOUGHT: SOMETHING BIG



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES: JANUARY 2020

Images PA Images

Let's start with euphoria: that moment the goal is scored. I won't say I knew it was in as soon as I hit it, as that sort of talk is for forwards. But it did feel good. A clean strike. However, with my success record when it comes to shooting, nothing is guaranteed – I had to wait for the ball to hit the net. And then? And then everything gets blurry. Crazy emotions, pure joy, utter relief, and before I know it I'm at the bottom of a sky-blue pile of team-mates. It's a great moment. It's the *best* moment. The Premier League title is one step closer – so close now – and that's the most important thing. But none of those players on top of me know that this will be my last game at the Etihad Stadium.



The warmth of that May evening will never leave me. But in January, after we had tasted defeat at Newcastle on a cold, snowy night in the North East, it seemed that any hopes of Manchester City retaining the Premier League title had gone. That's what the experts said, anyway.

Shortly after that 2-1 loss, Pep Guardiola called a meeting. 'Do you believe we can still win the title?' he asked us. 'Do you believe there's still...' Before he could finish his sentence, I yelled, 'Of course we can do it!' I wasn't saying it for effect; I wasn't simply playing the role of the chest-beating captain. I had been part of three previous Premier League-winning teams and I understood how it worked; I understood that there was too much football to play, and too much pressure on our rivals for us to just wave the white flag.

Many of my team-mates and I were able to tell the story of how it felt when we won our first title. In 2012, what worked in our favour is that we never had the lead for too long, and I knew Liverpool would be under a lot of pressure. A lead at the top makes the pressure build up, especially when you're dealing with it for the first time. You'll tell yourself and the public that you'll behave in such a way – you'll do this right, you'll do that right – but the reality is so different and so difficult.

When you've won it once, it becomes easier the next time. But with the pressure on Liverpool to achieve what they so desperately wanted, I think there was a little bit of an advantage to the team chasing them. The consensus after the meeting, then, was that we had been through a bad patch but we could turn it around at any point. The way we did it from there, though, was beyond even our expectations.

What followed was a competition of the highest quality. Liverpool drew a few matches to let us back in, but that run-in? For both teams to keep winning and winning was exceptional. Much was made about the team playing second, and yes, you'd rather play and win first, then heap the pressure on your rival. *Over to you...* But whenever we played second there was that added pressure, and we coped with it so well. It might even have brought the best out of us, because our experience and quality came to the fore.

I'd watched a lot of my team's quality from the sidelines that year. I began the season with a few niggly injuries, but even when fit I was starting on the bench. That was new for me. It gave me time to think.

My thoughts had turned to my future, and as the season progressed it became clear to me that it would be my last at the club I'd fallen in





"AGAINST WATFORD, I'D BEEN STUPID TO LISTEN TO GÜNDOĞAN. I SHOULD HAVE SHOT FOUR OR FIVE TIMES. THIS TIME I WOULD"

love with. I was desperate to play, but as that couldn't always happen I started thinking about different scenarios. I was with Fabian Delph, who was also spending time on the sidelines, and I told him that, one way or another, I was going to get strong for the end of the season; I was going to have a meaningful impact on the team and the season; and I was going to lift trophies. That's what I truly believed.

I've been fortunate to have always played when I've been fit, but this was a bit different. What's annoyed me over the years is players who aren't playing becoming sulky and negative. Football is difficult enough without that energy stifling a dressing room.

I tried to put my feelings and emotions aside and be extra positive, to impact the team in that way. I didn't want to put the wrong kind of pressure on my team-mates, because that's what negativity can do. So, when I didn't play, I just focused on the positives, and I think that played an important role. A lot of the conversations on the bench were with Fabian, but also Riyad Mahrez. I could tell he was frustrated, but I told him that if he started moaning about his situation then it was never going to happen for him. I told him to visualise a moment, and that moment could define his whole season. It was hard for him, but I knew his chance would come.

In the end, I think it was the squad's talent, depth and attitude that won us the Premier League title. Every week the talk was: can we cope without Fernandinho? Can we cope without Kevin De Bruyne? Can we cope without Kompany? We suffered more injuries than anyone can remember, but as a collective we always answered those questions.

At the heart of the defence, things would always change. One week it was John Stones and me; then it was Stones and Nicolas Otamendi, or Aymeric Laporte and Otamendi. It didn't matter, though, and that was the strength of Manchester City. Any team competing with us had a big problem: lose a key player in a key area and they would struggle, but City – especially last season – didn't flinch.

We also had an intense competitive spirit, and that comes from the manager. Chasing a team down, you need that. And while we all know that Pep is a brilliant football man and an exceptional tactician, what's just as important is that he is such a competitor. As a group, we were so driven by him that we were able to bounce back from the blip over Christmas and defeat at Newcastle.

There was no margin for error. To win every game, and to *have* to win every game from January, is something really special. Liverpool were that good. They *are* that good. It's not a historical rivalry like the one with United, but it's a modern rivalry. It's about two clubs; two sets of players. They know that, to win things, the other club must be beaten, and for that to happen you have to be at your very best.

There's mutual respect there. I watch Liverpool and see a team near perfection. I have so much respect for them – for the club, its history and the manager – but I tell you what: I want to beat them more than anyone else. To do that, there's no room for errors.

If you want to do well against Liverpool, only extreme measures will give you a good result. If you're extremely well-organised defensively and choose to play with a more negative approach, then I'm sure the sheer force and determination of a side as good as that can win them the game. That's what we did at Anfield earlier in the season, although in the end we were unlucky not to leave with three points after Mahrez missed a late penalty.

If you go down the other end and try to match them for intensity, energy and physicality in an open game, you can achieve good things again. What's certain is that you can't be stuck anywhere in between. At Anfield we were extremely cautious, but at home we needed to win and so were extremely offensive. We had a plan and we worked on it.

But as soon as you start playing, the plans matter less and less. It's about desire. For all of the talk, the meetings and the videos analysed, games like our 2-1 win against Liverpool at the Etihad come down to that desire. I will never forget Fernandinho's challenge in the first five minutes. And then Bernardo Silva made a tackle, and the tone was set. That desire, that hunger from players – some who are used to making challenges, some less so – decided the game for us.

Desire, talent and a bit of luck – all are needed if a title is to be won. We had some of the latter against Spurs in April, when they pushed us really hard and could have got a 1-1 draw, but our ability to overcome difficult situations was key.

Burnley away – our third-from-last game – was always going to be awkward. That game was everything we expected. They left the grass a bit longer and it felt like it was dry, not watered. We like to move the ball from side to side, and on a pitch in that condition you lose a bit of zip. You have to get on with it, though, and we had some chances, but it became very difficult. At half-time we all stayed calm. We spoke of just being better. Simple as that. Attack with more conviction. We did, and Sergio Agüero eventually got us the goal. I think it was after that win – and I wouldn't have made a big deal of it – that I started to feel things were going our way.

But next came Leicester. At half-time, as it was against Burnley, the score was 0-0 and we had to be as calm. That's not easy at your own ground, in front of your own supporters going through everything so emotionally with you, but you have to try.

As the second half wore on, with the big screens shining out that it was goalless, the fans were getting nervous and you could sense it on the pitch. You can hear it... *feel* it. Every chance we missed, the groans would become more audible and more desperate. Impatience is in the ground with you. You can't control the crowd, but I did start to wonder if my team-mates would get affected by it. I encouraged them. 'Stay calm' was the call. I don't know if it worked, though, and maybe I was simply shouting at myself. ▶

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You have to pack away all your emotions and put them in a little box. We were overly emotional, overly aggressive, overly attacking and not doing the things we usually do. It was desperate stuff, and that wasn't what we wanted. But then, against an organised and defiant side like Leicester – a revamped team who had started to progress enormously under Brendan Rodgers; a team that had already beaten us earlier in the season – I began to think that it might take something different. Something special.

This will sound daft, but that morning as I woke up and looked out of my window, I had a thought: *I'm going to do something big tonight*. It was just a feeling. But, as I'd made a vital block during the first half, maybe my moment had been and gone.

Twenty minutes were left. Someone had better have a moment and have it pretty soon. The problem was, in terms of space, the game had become really tight. We'd had the same scenario a few weeks earlier against Watford: like Leicester, they were marking our midfielders out of the game. They kept four against three in the backline, and always had cover there with one player spare. It was so packed that the only man free was the guy in possession. Against Watford, I'd get near the penalty area with the ball, but every time I had İlkay Gündoğan in my ear shouting, 'Don't shoot, don't shoot!'

After that game, I thought I'd been stupid for listening to Gündoğan. I should have shot four or five times, because such was the space and time I had, I'm sure one would have gone in. And here we were once again: packed midfield, packed defence, and I was getting on the ball a lot. I was able to carry it forward, so I decided that this time, despite my team-mates' objections, I would take the shot.

I cut across the ball and gave it a good bend, like fading a golf shot. Kasper Schmeichel had been in unbelievable form all night, so getting the ball right into the top corner was key. And then the whole ground erupted. Bedlam. I just wheeled away like a crazy person.

There was a terrifying moment after that when Kelechi Iheanacho, our former team-mate, had a chance for Leicester towards the end of the game. Knowing him from training, he would always bang that in, but he pulled the ball wide and the game was won.

I never sleep after night games, but there was absolutely no chance with this one. I sat up and chatted to Carla, my wife. We talked about how special a moment it had been; how no one could have written the script better for me. There were a lot of emotions that night. Only Carla and a few close friends knew that my career at City was coming to an end, which added to the poignancy. There was still a job to do, though. Fail to win at Brighton and my goal means nothing.

And then, at Brighton, we were 1-0 down and Liverpool were 1-0 up at home to Wolves. I didn't panic, though. *Stay calm*. Like Burnley, the pitch wasn't ideal, but I looked at our big players like Agüero and David Silva and knew they were up for it. *It's going to happen*. We dominated, and to see Riyad score in the 4-1 win – after those conversations we'd had on the bench months before – was the icing on the cake.

Six days later, we beat Watford in the FA Cup final, and I think that's when I was happiest. For the first time, I could be satisfied. When you know it's the end, you can finally look back. There was only satisfaction at what we and I had achieved. My last game for City, a 6-0 win in the cup final at Wembley, a treble won, and my winner against Leicester still buzzing around my mind – it doesn't get better than that, does it?

"YOU HAVE TO PACK AWAY YOUR EMOTIONS IN A LITTLE BOX. BUT AGAINST LEICESTER, I THOUGHT IT MIGHT TAKE SOMETHING SPECIAL"

I'd joined this club in 2008 and couldn't have dreamed of what we'd achieve together. Thanks to some of the best football people around, and brilliant owners who respected City's heritage as well as building an exciting future, we'd done so much. I'll always be proud of that.

I'd been in Manchester for 11 years and loved calling it home – it's a special place. It's weird: ask me whether I have an association with Britain or England, having lived here for so long, and I would say less so than I do with Manchester. I feel Manc, and I guess I always will.

Kompany's book, 'Treble Triumph: My Inside Story Of Manchester City's Greatest-Ever Season', is published by Simon & Schuster and out now

Images PA Images/ Getty Images

DICKOVVV



Manchester City may now be a slick footballing juggernaut and among the favourites for the game's biggest honours, but two decades ago they were slumming it in the third tier – and could have sunk even lower

Words Nick Moore



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
OCTOBER 2018

Image Rex Features

There have been numerous *Sliding Doors* moments through English football history. What if Azerbaijani linesman Tofiq Bahramov had signalled 'no goal' in '66? What would have happened if Stuart Pearce had chipped a Panenka penalty past Bodo Illgner at Italia 90? What if Mark Robins hadn't scored against Nottingham Forest in 1990 and Manchester United had sacked Alex Ferguson?

All of these scenarios would have led to a very different sporting world, as unknowable butterfly effects unfolded. However, few moments can have made a bigger difference to our game's overall narrative than the one at Wembley on May 30, 1999. With 94 minutes on the clock and Manchester City trailing 2-1 to Gillingham in the Second Division Play-off Final, the ball, pumped long and flicked forward, fell to Paul Dickov. The Scottish scrapper – nicknamed 'the Crocus' by his manager Joe Royle after a late-season flowering of form – belted it home emphatically. A deflated Gills side collapsed during the penalty shootout.

But what if he'd missed?

"Manchester City were in a mess," Royle tells *FourFourTwo*. "I really don't know what would have happened to the club if we hadn't got out of that division immediately. I'm not convinced there would even have *been* a next year."

Goalkeeper Nicky Weaver, who saved two penalties in the shootout, agrees. "Who knows where we'd have ended up if Dicky hadn't got that equaliser," he tells *FFT*. "Just look at what happened to Leeds. It definitely wouldn't have got any easier. City were a soap opera club, and every game was a cup final for our opponents."

And Christie McDonald, a fan of many blue moons, thinks it would have been curtains. "People say, 'Oh, if City hadn't gone up that year, we'd have just done it the following season'," he explains. "But I don't agree. I don't think things would have been OK if Dickov's goal hadn't gone in. It wouldn't have happened the year after. People were at the end of their tethers – 2-0 down at Wembley heading into injury time, many were saying, 'That's it, I'm finished with City'. I'm sure that the move to the Commonwealth Stadium wouldn't have happened, and Maine Road was a real mess. The supporters had been fantastic that season, but it wouldn't have carried on."

In other words: no late Dickov equaliser or Weaver penalty saves? Possibly administration, and no Manchester City. But almost certainly no speedy revival, no Sheikh Mansour, no "AGUEROOOOOO!", and no record-breaking Premier League triumph last term.

"People look back on those days with rose-tinted specs and say, 'It was a laugh, wasn't it?'" adds McDonald. "But no. No it wasn't. It was horrible. It was awful. It was s**t. The running of the football club was laughable, the relationship between fans and players was poisonous, and the atmosphere was horrendous. I hated it."

This is how City escaped through the door that led to glory.

"I SELECTED KINKLADZE FOR THREE MATCHES – IN TWO HE WAS ANONYMOUS, IN THE OTHER HE WAS ABYSMAL"

The Blues' apex and nadir lie exactly, and somehow satisfyingly, two decades apart. In April 2018, City, now the most financially powerful club in the sport, led by its most-admired manager and packed with some of the globe's top stars, clinched the title in style. Spool back to April 1998, however, and the club were at a shambolic low.

In the penultimate match of the Division One season, against QPR at Maine Road, Jamie Pollock scored one of the most gut-wrenching own goals of all time (a looped header over his keeper). It ended 2-2, with the point enough to keep the Rs up. Their supporters hijacked an online poll to name Pollock the most influential human being of the last millennium. "I beat Jesus into second place," he remembers.

City won 5-2 at Stoke in the last game, but it wasn't enough. Falling into the third tier for the first time in their history was humiliating, and chairman Francis Lee resigned during the dreadful run-in.

Defender Richard Edghill had lived through years of chopping and changing. "We had so many managers, and each played a different style and brought in their own players," he says. "I think by the time Joe Royle arrived, there were 54 professionals. That's not ideal when you can only put 11 on the pitch – you can't keep 54 people happy."







Top to bottom Feed the Goat: Shaun split opinion but top-scored at Maine Road for three seasons on the spin; fans savour the Wembley atmosphere; as both sets of players make their way onto the pitch

Royle, who took over halfway through 1997-98, had a big job on his hands. "The survival rate of a boss seemed to be months rather than years," he says. "Players that had been forgotten were somehow still knocking around. I remember deadline day – I was in the boardroom with the chairman and we were getting players out on loan all over the place and off the wage bill. We needed a fresh start."

Among those to move on were Uwe Rosler and terrace idol Georgi Kinkladze. The Georgian playmaker left with a jibe at Royle, claiming if he'd been picked more, demotion from the second tier could have been avoided. Royle responded robustly. "His parting shot was like all his others – delivered from a long way out and hopelessly wide of the mark. I selected him for three matches – in two he was anonymous, in the other one he was abysmal."

Reflecting now, Royle is a little less harsh. "Geo had amazing talent, but I remember him standing on a muddy pitch in a thunderstorm at Port Vale and you could tell he didn't fancy it. He was our highest paid player and he had to go. The third tier wasn't for him."



The 'foreign player not fancying a wet Tuesday night at Stoke' cliche having been invoked, Kinkladze packed his bags for Ajax. Also out the door were Paul Beesley, David Morley, Martin Phillips, Scott Hiley, Ian Brightwell, Kit Symons and Nigel Clough. Arriving were Danny Tiatto, Ian Bishop and youngster Danny Allsopp. Royle was left with a team packed full of workhorses that he believed could do a job at this level.

The opening day suggested he was right. More than 30,000 people packed into Maine Road – the highest third-tier attendance for over 20 years – to see City breeze past Blackpool 3-0.

Young keeper Weaver, in particular, looked like a future star. "Royle cleared the decks, and luckily he saw something in me," remembers Weaver. "I was only 19, so playing in the Second Division was fine by me. The mood in the dressing room was bad when we got relegated, but it was OK that year – a good blend of youth and experience."

But City soon stuttered. Draws with Wrexham, Notts County (who they'd battered 7-1 in the League Cup a few days earlier), Chesterfield, Northampton, Millwall and Burnley were followed by a 1-0 defeat at home to Preston. "It took us a while to get going," admits Royle. "We needed to settle down, but whenever you're relegated there's always a hangover. It's hard to get going when you've had disappointments. We weren't that bad, but there were a lot of draws.

"We were also a big-name scalp for everyone and it caught us out. Teams were coming to play at this huge ground, and they were often bringing more supporters to Maine Road than they got at home. The opposition fans were enjoying every moment of being in Manchester, like staying overnight and going to a show! And then their team were playing well. It was a strange phenomenon."

Sinking to 12th at Christmas, the fans despaired. "We were so bad that it looked like we might go down again," says Christie McDonald. "There was a match at Wrexham on Boxing Day that was especially grim. It was pissing down, not fit to play a game. It should have been called off, but the police bottled it because there was loads of Blues in town and it was going off left, right and centre.

"We'd go to these places, get off the train and find loads of Begbie characters who'd just wandered out of the Conservative Club looking for a fight. Whole towns were emptying for a scrap! You'd be thinking, 'For God's sake, we don't need this'.

"I remember an FA Cup Second Round tie, on a Friday night against Darlington, and the relationship between fans and management had never been worse. It was 90 minutes of abusing Royle and [first-team coach] Willie Donachie. Willie actually ended up writing an article in the *Manchester Evening News* insisting, 'This isn't helping anybody'. But our attitude was just 'f**k off'."

Donachie said he was "feeling sick", admitting, "I can honestly say it left me wondering why I bother." Four days after drawing 1-1 with Darlington, City exited the Auto Windscreens Trophy to Mansfield in front of Maine Road's lowest ever attendance: 3,007. The squad even stopped warming up on the pitch, preparing on nearby playing fields instead of running the gamut of hate from their own fans.

Royle had 99 problems, and the pitch was one. "We had Platt Lane as our training ground, although we couldn't always use it because it was community owned," he recalls. "One day the groundsman shyly asked me if we could find somewhere else to practise, because there was a non-league final coming up.

"We ended up in Oldham, on a surface that some joker christened 'Little Wembley'. We even trained at some local schools. We had to smile through it, but then we lost at York. That was a low." ▸

"CITY WERE A BIG SCALP – TEAMS OFTEN TOOK MORE FANS TO MAINE ROAD THAN THEY'D GET AT HOME"

Image Rex Features/PA Images/Getty Images

"IT'S AROUND THAT TIME I COINED THE WORD 'CITY-ITIS'"

Royle realised his squad needed a rethink. Lee Bradbury was shipped out, while Michael Branch arrived on loan from Everton. But it was the signings of Andy Morrison from Huddersfield and Terry Cooke, on loan from Manchester United, that turned the season around.

Morrison was exactly what City needed. "Andy changed our season, even though he had poor knees," says Royle. "We desperately needed a leader. He got hold of the dressing room."

Weaver agrees: "Morrison was a huge signing for us. Joe made him captain straight away. He was an intimidating figure for the opposition and he could be intimidating as a team-mate as well. I'd stand behind him in the tunnel and he'd be beating his chest, ready for battle. The other team would be thinking, 'I don't fancy tangling with him today'. But to be fair to Andy, he wasn't just a brute and growling pitbull. He had a great touch, too."

The jinky Cooke injected more creativity, midfielder Bishop provided consistency, and Weaver now looked unbeatable between the posts. Upfront, meanwhile, the partnership between Paul Dickov and Shaun Goater was blossoming.

"When I signed Shaun, I got letters saying he would never be a City player," says Royle. "But he was our top scorer that season [1998-99], then our leading scorer for the next two seasons. He even did well in the Premier League, and I still received letters saying he wasn't good enough! But disgruntled supporters were part of the package. It must have been hard, especially with Fergie's crew down the road winning everything. But Dickov and Goater were as honest as they come. They got in the box and knew where the goal was."

After the 2-1 defeat at York, with City 11 points above the relegation zone, things finally began to change. "The turning point was the home game against league leaders Stoke in late December," says Ric Turner, editor of City fanzine *Blue Moon*. "We were 1-0 down at half-time, but turned things around in the second half to win 2-1. You could sense something changed. The fans seemed to lift the players that day, and confidence grew. We went on an 11-game unbeaten run after that."

Royle deserved credit, says Edghill. "He and Donachie really coached the team well. They were positive, they created a decent atmosphere, and the team responded. They did a great job, getting us to work for each other, tactically and in terms of motivation. There was a sense of humour and real spirit."

Terry Cooke ran riot as Fulham were overrun 3-0. Stoke, Millwall and Macclesfield were also dispatched before Burnley were thrashed 6-0 at Turf Moor thanks to a 16-minute Goater hat-trick. Momentum was building all the while.

Below Gillingham keeper Vince Bartram can't look as opposite number Nicky Weaver celebrates victory

"We got the blend right," says Royle. "The new guys and the senior players clicked, and we became one of the best sides in the division.

"I remember saying to coach Asa Hartford, 'Something very strange is going on here.' It's around that time I coined the phrase 'City-itis'. When you think things can't get any worse, they do, and when you think they can't get any better, they do."

City beat York 4-0 in the last league game of the season to secure 3rd place and book a play-off semi-final against Wigan. Again, Lady Luck played a role. "We were 1-0 down within a minute at Springfield Park due to a complete cock-up," recalls Christie McDonald. "But we got it back to 1-1. At Maine Road, though, we were very fortunate – Wigan should have had a penalty, and Goater scored with a handball."

City-itis was about to go critical: the Blues were off to Wembley.

"MY FIRST THOUGHT AS HE HIT IT WAS, 'YOU W**KER'"

Four days after United endured their 'Football, bloody hell' moment in Barcelona ("I remember fans singing, 'You can stick your f**king Treble up your arse,'" says Ric Turner), City took part in what's still recognised as one of the greatest English play-off dramas.

"THE RAW EMOTION WAS EVEN GREATER THAN AGUEROOOO. IF I WAS DROWNING AND MY LIFE FLASHED BEFORE ME, I'D SEE DICKOV'S GOAL"



"We were confident – we'd finished well and won 2-0 at Gillingham during the run-in," says Royle. "But one or two of the young lads didn't show up on the day. I think the occasion got to them."

Carl Asaba's 81st-minute effort and a Rob Taylor drive five minutes later seemed to have won it for the Gills. City were staring at another season in the third tier, and – possibly – real trouble. "I'm not a ranter from the crazy crew, but I did turn to Willie Donachie and say, 'It looks like we're at Scunthorpe next year, if there is a next year,'" says Royle.

The fans also saw optimism morph into agony. "I thought it would be OK, because instinct was telling me if City were going to ruin their season, we'd have already done it by now," laughs Christie McDonald. "But it was horrible. At 2-0, many hardened blokes were crying. I was slumped. When Kevin Horlock scored on 90 minutes, I was actually a bit angry. I thought, 'Why give us that bit of hope?'"

Ric Turner was similarly disconsolate: "I couldn't believe that, when it really mattered the most, the club had let us down once again."

But then the fourth official revealed there were five minutes of injury time. "I can still picture Gillingham boss Tony Pulis doing his nut," says Weaver. "Dickov had missed a few chances and Vince Bartram made some good saves in the Gillingham goal. But then Dicky struck gold."

It's a moment City fans will never forget. "I was just waiting for the final whistle to go," says McDonald. "Dickov was awful, and my first thought as he hit the shot was, 'You w**ker'. He couldn't finish. Then it was like slow motion. When it went in, the raw emotion was even greater than Sergio Aguero's title-winner. If I was drowning, and my life flashed before me, that goal would be one of the things I'd see."

As extra time progressed, victory seemed "in the stars", says Weaver. "They'd already taken their forwards off and put defensive players on. Extra time came and went. The biggest thing was the penalties being at the City end. None of us were internationals, or really used to a big stage, so it helped. I think I looked big in that goal."

Weaver repelled Gillingham's first penalty from Paul Smith. "It was a good start, although people forget that Dickov missed his. It makes me feel sorry for Kevin Horlock, because he scored a vital goal and his penalty, but everyone talks about Dickov as the hero."

As Edghill stepped up, City fans drew their breath. He'd never scored a goal for City. "We thought, 'What on earth is he doing taking one?'" says McDonald. "I wouldn't have put money on him," admits Weaver.

But his effort was near perfection, clipping the underside of the bar. "I know from talking to fans that people were thinking, 'Oh my God', but I was actually pretty confident," recalls Edghill. "Once we were in the play-offs I started practising – I took loads of penalties every day and it was an incredible feeling when it went in."

Guy Butters had to beat Weaver to keep the Gills alive. "I remember asking the linesman, 'If I save this, is that it?'" reveals the keeper. "He said, 'Yes' and I replied, 'Are you sure?'

"It wasn't a great penalty and I got decent hands on it. Then I pulled a face I've never pulled before or since. I didn't want the feeling to end so I leapt over the advertising boards. Only big Andy Morrison stopped me. The last thing I needed was a 20 man pile-on, but I got it."

Weaver turned up at the post-match press conference with a can of lager. Royle was royally relieved. "Ian Bishop coming on as substitute oddly turned us around, even though we went 2-0 down after he did," he laughs. "His passing and moving got us going. But what happened at the end was crazy. Gillingham will always feel hard done by."

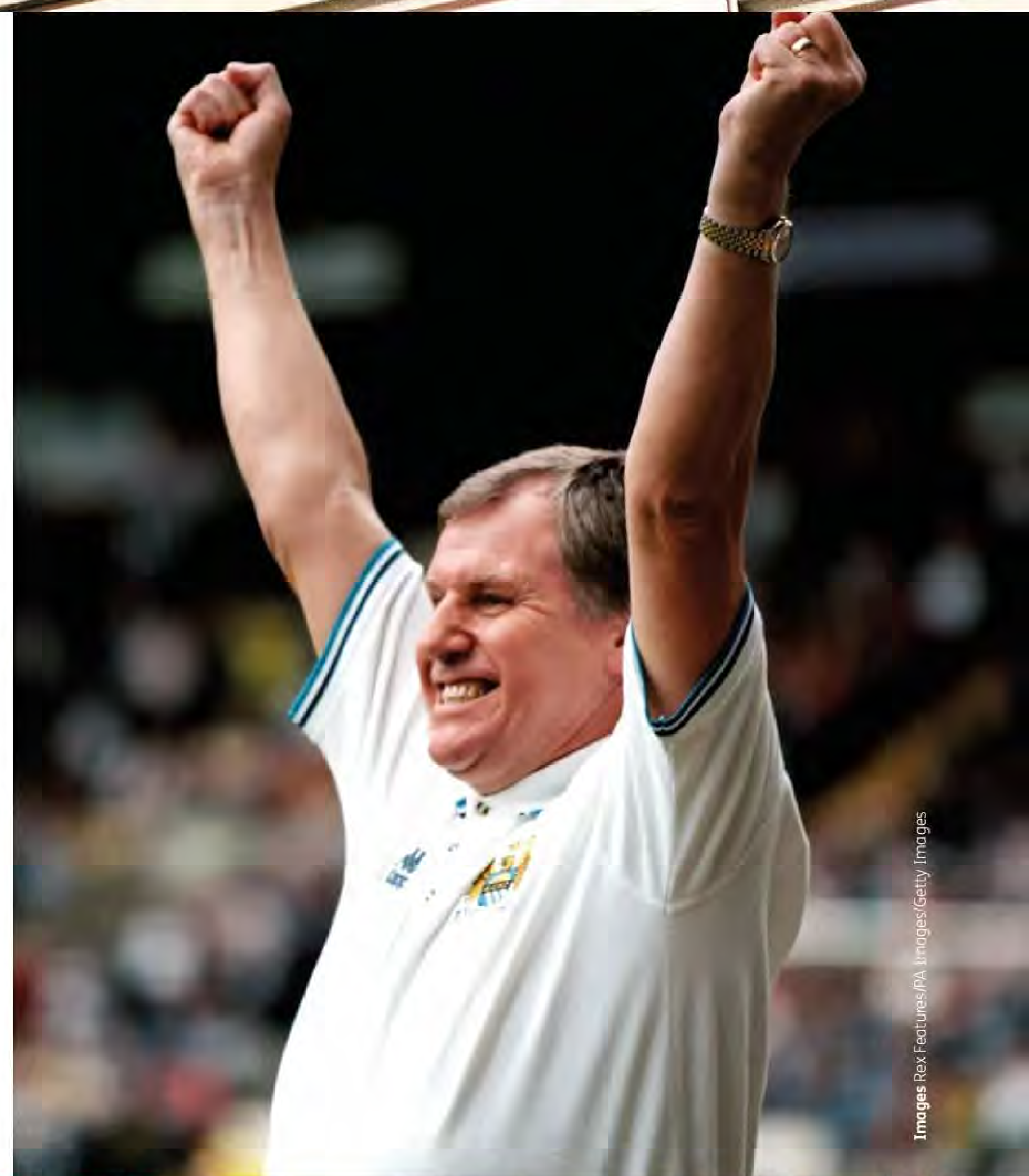
The rest is history. City were promoted to the Premier League a year later; then demoted and re-promoted, where they would remain until reaching their current zenith. "I suppose we did play a part in getting City where they are today," reflects Weaver. "It was early in my career and I didn't really take in how big that day was. But whenever I go to Manchester now, it's still all anyone wants to talk about. And my shirt from Wembley is at my mum and dad's house, at the top of the stairs. When I'm there, I think about that match."

Royal concurs. "Looking at the club now, it's unbelievable. I still have a great rapport with the fans, and I think they all know just how vital that moment was. You can probably say City-itis has been well and truly banished."

Well, for now at least.



Top to bottom Mad for it: Liam Gallagher indicates how many penalty saves Weaver made (possibly); gaffer Royle turned City's fortunes around; play-off glory in '99 was followed by automatic promotion to the top tier a year later



Images Rex Features/PA Images/Getty Images



50 GREATEST MAN CITY PLAYERS

From Trautmann to Touré, Doyle to De Bruyne, we celebrate the most model Citizens in the club's history

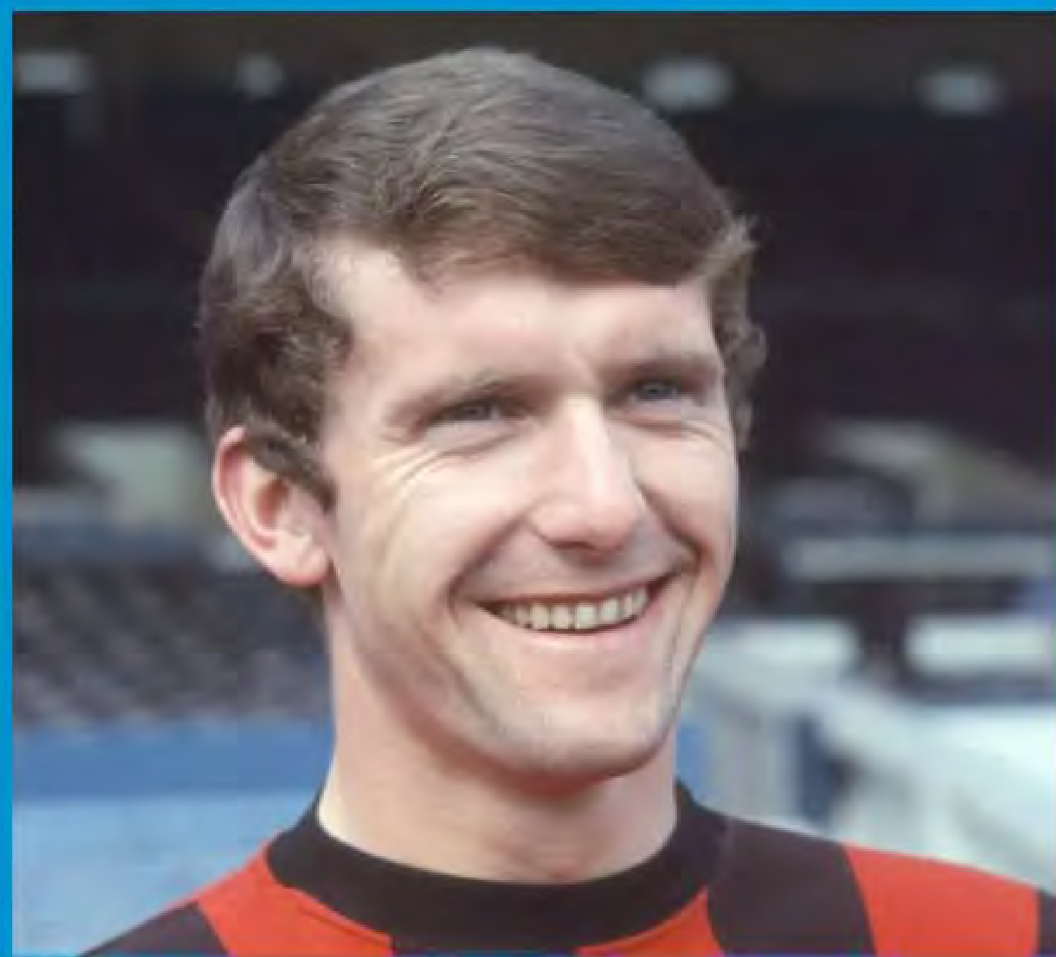
Words Chris Schilling **Photos** Getty Images/Alamy

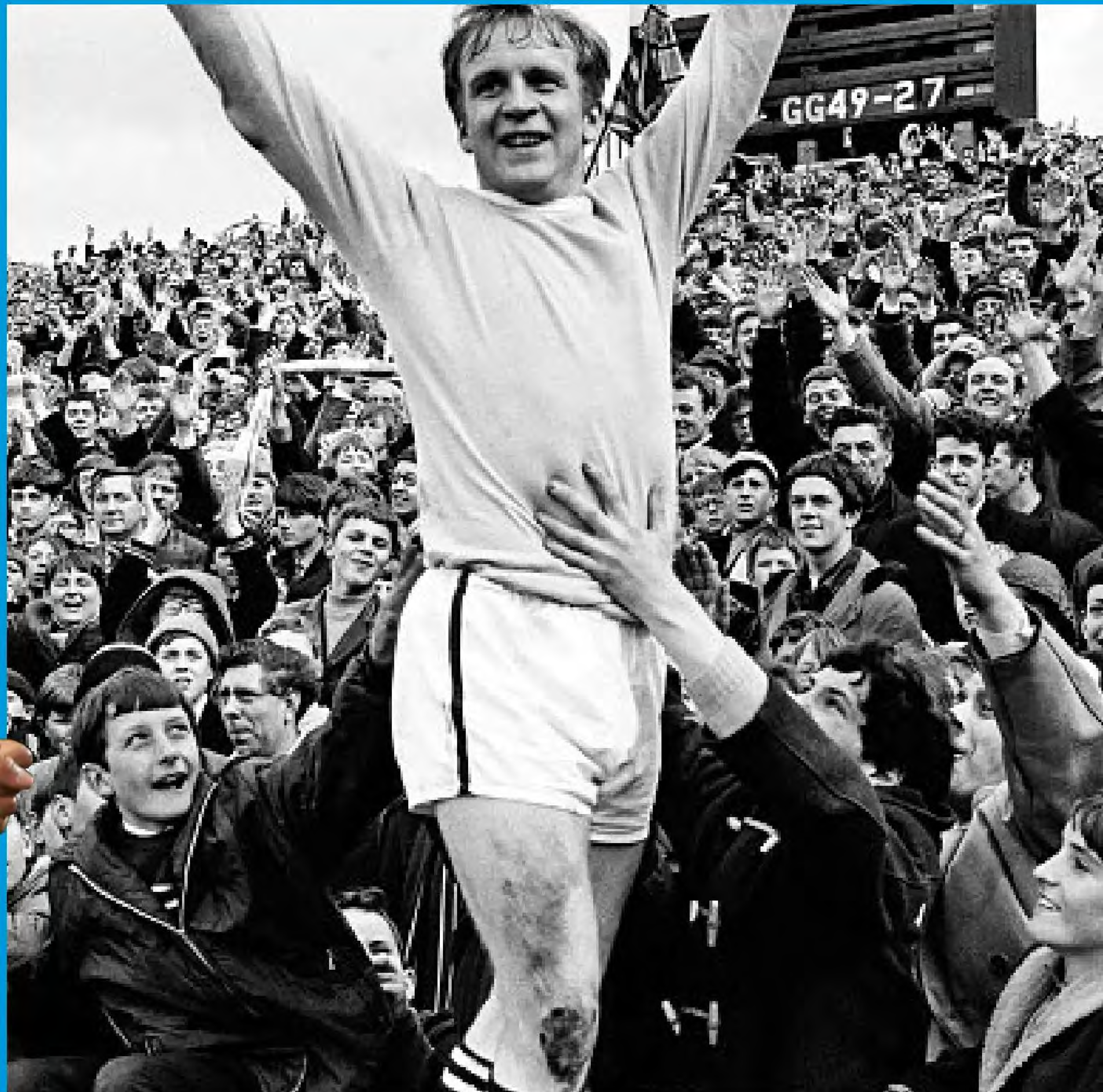
From humble Victorian-era beginnings as a church side to one of the richest clubs of the modern age, it's been quite the journey for the club once known as St Mark's (West Gorton). Despite what rival fans might suggest, Manchester City have a rich and fascinating history, even if successes have been sparsely scattered throughout their past compared to the sustained dominance of recent years. Still, even in the club's lowest moments, City have unearthed individual players who have given the fans plenty to cheer about, and we're commemorating 50 of the very best here. Given the significant physical demands of the modern game, it would be tempting to simply pick most of the current squad, with a smattering of those who've recently moved on to fresh pastures. But that would be to ignore the remarkable feats of several pre and post-war favourites and the impact of those whose names were chanted by supporters even as the side languished in the second and third tiers. Which means no place for some outstanding players who are still inking their names in City history: Raheem Sterling, İlkay Gündoğan, Riyad Mahrez, Rúben Dias, and Phil Foden, all of whom would likely earn a spot in a year or two's time. In the meantime, read on to find out who *has* made this fabled list...






POWER


ETIHAD
AIRWAYS



GG49-27

Alamy

ERLING HAALAND

2022–

50 Some might say that it takes years to become a legend, but while City's number nine is far too humble to call himself one, if a record-breaking debut season in which you score the most Premier League goals in a single campaign ever (36) en route to winning a historic treble doesn't make you a legend, then we don't know what does.

ALI BENARBIA

2001–2003

49 The Algerian's flame burned briefly but dazzlingly bright at City. A free signing in the twilight of his career, he was a class apart in the second tier, his sublime passing and silken touch helping Kevin Keegan's all-conquering side top the First Division with 99 points. Premier League pace proved too much for his ageing legs, but many City fans still fondly remember Benarbia's wizardry.



Gary M. Prior / Staff via Getty Images

"HE MADE THE POSITION OF DEEP-LYING FORWARD HIS"

DON REVIE

1951–1956

48 Though best known for his successful stint as Leeds manager in the 1960s and early '70s, as a player Revie made the position of deep-lying centre forward his own. Indeed, 'the Revie plan' was coined to describe his role as the focal point of City's attack, his pivotal displays earning him a Footballer of the Year award during the 1954–55 campaign.



Mirrorpix / Contributor via Getty

RICHARD DUNNE

2000–2009

47 He may hold unwanted records for the most own goals (ten) and the joint-most red cards (eight) in Premier League history, but Dunne's City legacy is assured for his stalwart defensive displays. Consistently willing to put his body on the line, he fully earned the affection of the fans, winning the club's Player of the Year award in four successive seasons.



Alex Livesey / Staff via Getty

Unknown (Popperfoto) WIKI CC

MAX WOOSNAM

1919–1925

46 Olympic gold medal winner and Wimbledon doubles champion, Woosnam is widely regarded as one of the greatest all-round British sportsmen. His City achievements shouldn't be overlooked either: the influential centre-back was appointed captain of a post-war City side, his performances convincing the national team to follow suit – even as his tennis career continued to flourish.

DAVID WHITE



1985–1993

45 Infuriating on off-days but nigh-unplayable at his best – once scoring four goals in an unforgettable display against Aston Villa – White was a winger with blistering pace and a real eye for goal. He flourished under the management of Peter Reid, helping City to two consecutive fifth-place finishes in the top flight: dizzying heights for the side back then.

Getty Images / Staff

BOBBY JOHNSTONE

1955–1959

44 Part of the 'Famous Five' forward line at Hibernian that struck terror into the hearts of Scottish defenders, Johnstone arrived in England with a fearsome reputation to uphold (and a fee to match). He lived up to the billing, scoring over 40 goals for City, including strikes in successive FA Cup finals – the first player to achieve that milestone.

PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

NIALL QUINN



1990–1996

43 A popular figure with supporters and team-mates alike during his six years at the club, the lanky forward embodied the cliché "good touch for a big lad". A consistently effective target man, he cemented his cult status among City fans when he donned the goalkeeper's jersey during a game against Derby County, immediately making a spectacular penalty save from Dean Saunders.

Mirrorpix / Contributor

EDIN DŽEKO



2011–2016

42 Despite failing to match the remarkable figures that saw City pay £27m to secure his services from Wolfsburg, the Bosnian diamond became a scorer of important goals in blue. In a hot streak during the 2013–14 title run-in, Džeko bagged a brace against city rivals United, alongside strikes at Hull, Palace and Everton. And without his crucial equaliser against QPR, *that* Agüero moment simply wouldn't have happened.

ANDREW YATES / Stringer

UWE RÖSLER



1994–1998

41 The powerful German forward's never-say-die attitude and committed performances during some of the club's darkest years won the hearts of even the most fed-up fans. After forging a productive partnership with the mercurial Paul Walsh, Alan Ball's disastrous stewardship saw his influence wane. Still, Rösler remained a leader by example, staying with the club after relegation to the second tier.

Chris Cole / Staff

BERNARDO SILVA

2017–present

40 Having led City's defence a merry dance in the Champions League, it was no surprise when Pep Guardiola shelled out over £40m for the twinkle-toed Portuguese midfielder. Allying phenomenal work rate to his undeniable skill, Silva played more games than anyone else during the record-breaking Centurions campaign, becoming even more pivotal in the much tighter title win the following season.



Tom Flathers / Contributor via Getty

CARLOS TEVEZ

2009–2013

39 'Welcome to Manchester' taunted the posters as the Argentinian firebrand switched allegiances from United to City; 29 goals in a whirlwind debut season suggested it was money well spent. Tevez would later blot his copybook after a ferocious falling-out with then manager Roberto Mancini, but he returned from his enforced garden leave in time to help City to their first league title since 1968.



Alex Livesey / Staff via Getty

Clive Brunskill / Staff via Getty

GEORGI KINKLADZE

1995–1998

38 A common regret among City fans of a certain vintage is that the Georgian dynamo's dazzling close control wasn't allowed to shine in a better side. Still, the dancing feet of the man affectionately known as 'Kinky' helped illuminate the gloom of that mid-'90s slump – most notably with a breathtaking solo goal that saw Kinkladze waltz through a bewitched Southampton defence.

DAVE EWING



1952–1962

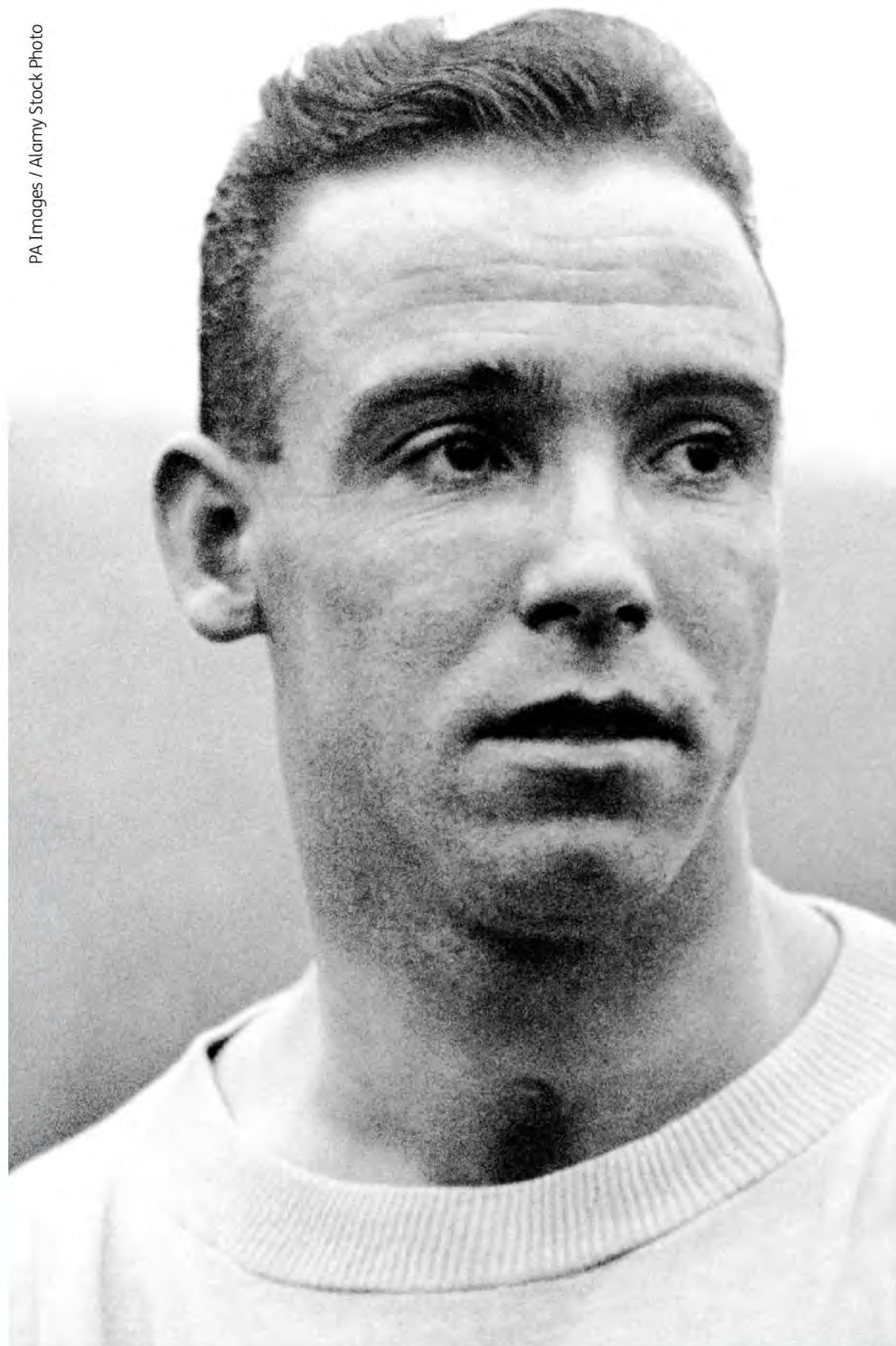
37 The Richard Dunne of the 1950s, Ewing had a similar habit of scoring own goals (trumping Dunne's tally with ten for City alone). Yet this no-nonsense centre-back was a similarly formidable defender: tough in the tackle and brave as a lion. Having pulled on the blue shirt for a decade, he returned to fill the role of reserve team coach in the early '70s.

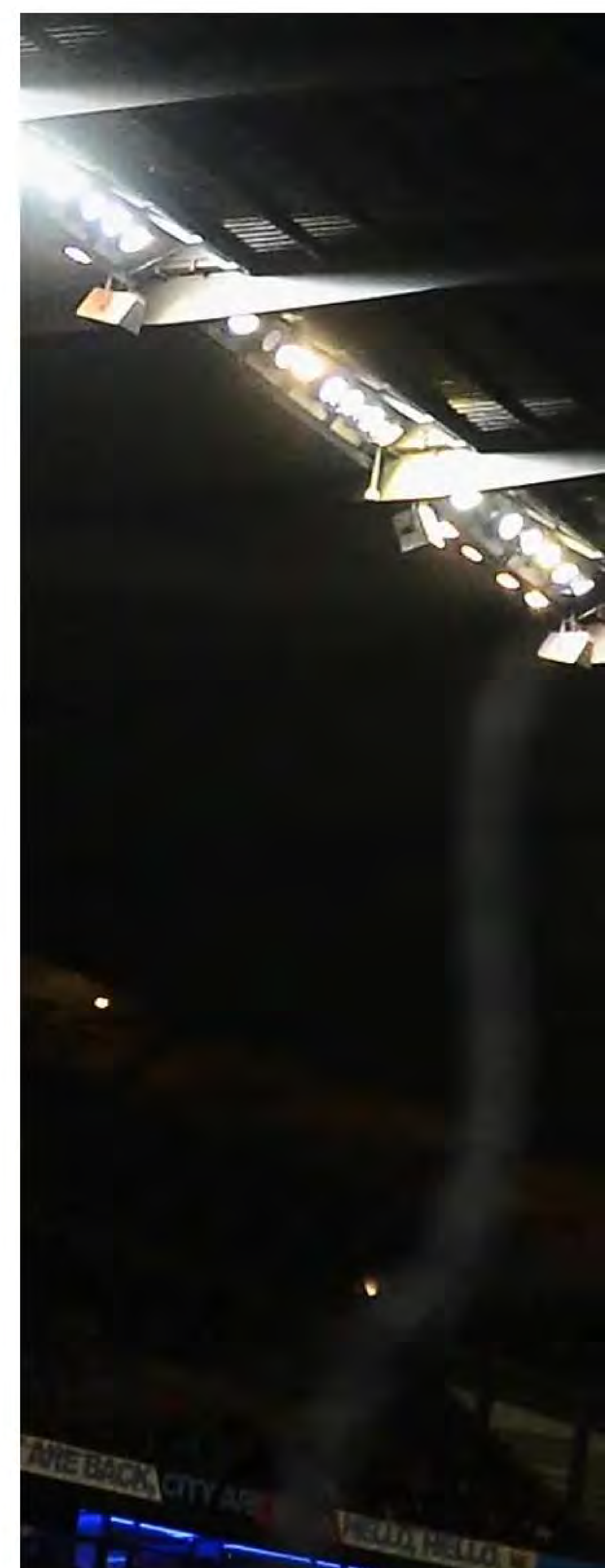
PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

ERNIE TOSELAND

1928–1938

36 Blessed with natural pace, Toseland's wing play was a key factor in City's first League title in the 1936-37 season. After the sublime came the ridiculous: the following season, he helped the Blues outscore every other side, yet they were ultimately relegated. It was an ignominious closing chapter to a fine City career; soon after, WWII brought his playing days to a premature end.


PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo



SHAUN WRIGHT-PHILLIPS

1999–2005, 2008–2011

35 Armchair statisticians will doubtless question the diminutive winger's place on this list. But raw numbers can't always account for a player's overall impact. Not since the days of Georgi Kinkladze had City fans witnessed such a skilful dribbler; the fact that he looked like a junior Blue wearing an oversized shirt only made it all the more thrilling to watch him take on defenders twice his size. Deployed as a wing-back by Kevin Keegan, his speed and skill made him a crucial asset down the right, his performances attracting the interest of then champions Chelsea. An emotional return followed in 2008, with two goals in his first game back before the big-money signings rolled in and this cult favourite found his opportunities limited.



Alex Livesey / Staff via Getty

PABLO ZABALETA

2008–2017

34 Signed from Espanyol for a meagre £6m before the Abu Dhabi United Group transformed the club, the Argentinian defender could so easily have become a forgotten man, lost amid an array of more glamorous, expensive signings. Yet despite competing for a right-back berth with popular academy graduate Micah Richards, Zabaleta quickly became a firm favourite among City supporters. His consistency, bravery and indefatigable spirit on the pitch endeared him to fans as he became a growing influence off it. Among the club's foreign contingent, Zabaleta made a particular effort to integrate himself; by the time he left the club in 2017 after nine seasons and 333 appearances he was an honorary Mancunian – with the accent to prove it.


Laurence Griffiths / Staff via Getty



Laurence Griffiths / Staff Via Getty

JOE HART

2006–2018

33 Ruthlessly cast aside by Pep Guardiola shortly after the Catalan's arrival, Hart's career quickly hit the skids. So much so, in fact, that it's easy to forget what a pivotal role he played in City's success over the previous decade. Competing with Kasper Schmeichel for the no. 1 spot, Hart's exceptional shot-stopping gave him the edge over his Danish counterpart, who was eventually shipped out to Notts County. Between 2010 and 2015, Hart earned four Golden Gloves in five seasons for the most clean sheets. During those years he put on several goalkeeping masterclasses, including a remarkable 0-0 at White Hart Lane and an astonishing Champions League night at the Etihad where he almost single-handedly kept Jürgen Klopp's dominant Dortmund at bay.



NurPhoto / Contributor

ROY PAUL

1950–1957

32 Proud Welshman Paul plied his defensive trade over more than a decade at Swansea, although the Second World War restricted his career in the first team to just four seasons. He was 30 when he signed for a just-relegated City in 1950 but quickly established himself as the team's defensive linchpin, his consistent displays earning him the club captaincy during the Blues' successful promotion campaign. Though City's fortunes in the top division fluctuated, Paul led the team to two cup finals in the mid 1950s: the first, a 3-1 defeat to Newcastle, was followed by a thrilling victory by the same scoreline against Leicester. Recognising he was struggling to keep pace with younger opponents, he played on for another season before retiring from the game.


Ron Case / Stringer Via Getty

EDERSON

2017–present

31 If supporters' grumbles about Hart's departure grew louder after a series of high-profile errors from new number one Claudio Bravo, they were quietened by his ultimate replacement. Arriving from Benfica with an eye-watering price tag of £35m (which was soon dwarfed by the fees spent by Liverpool on Allison and Chelsea on Kepa Arrizabalaga), the Brazilian keeper's extraordinary distribution and composure under pressure saw him become a vital component in Guardiola's record-breaking side. Capable of sweeping long balls to either wing with almost laser-like accuracy, Ederson has three direct assists to his name – and despite his risky habit of racing from his goal to break up opposition attacks, he boasts a clean-sheet record of one in every two games.

KEN BARNES

1950–1961

30 Barnes joined City on the same day as Roy Paul, though the younger player's impact was far less immediate. Outside a single first-team appearance in 1952, he was confined to the reserves until City introduced the Revie plan, into which wing-half Barnes fitted like a glove. When Paul retired, Barnes took over the captaincy and began to weigh in with his share of goals, too – albeit largely from 12 yards. An influential and admired figure in the dressing room, he took several younger players under his wing. Four years as player-manager at Wrexham followed in the early '60s before Barnes finally hung up his boots.


PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

SHAUN GOATER

1998–2003

29 Despite an outstanding scoring record at Bristol City, many were unconvinced when the Bermudan forward arrived at Maine Road during the club's yo-yo years. Yet "Feed the Goat and he will score" became a regular chant among the City faithful, as his goals helped the club bounce back from the third tier. Goater continued to prove the doubters wrong, notching 29 goals as City secured back-to-back promotions and top-scoring again despite limited appearances in another relegation season. His best campaign followed: in Kevin Keegan's free-scoring Division One side, he became the first City player to pass the 30-goal tally since Francis Lee. And 'The Goat' rubber-stamped his status as a City legend by memorably robbing Gary Neville for the first of a brace in a thrilling derby victory.



Getty Images


Evening Standard / Stringer


PA Images / Alamy

JOE HAYES

1953–1965

28 Local derbies seemed to bring out the best in the Lancastrian forward, who notched up no fewer than ten goals in 17 appearances against Manchester United. Then again, goals came easily to the former mill worker, whose 12 years at the club saw him find the net 152 times in 363 appearances in all competitions – making him the fifth highest scorer in City's history. As a teenager, he shone in the 1955 cup final defeat before going one better the following year with the opening strike in City's famous 3-1 victory. His deadly finishing saw him regularly top the scoring charts; only a severe knee injury in 1963 prevented him from eclipsing Tommy Johnson.

NEIL YOUNG

1961–1972

27 Young was perhaps destined to become a City hero from the start having turned down United to join the Citizens. His time at Maine Road got off to an unremarkable start, but the dream-team management partnership of Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison helped this talented left winger to fully realise his potential. Pushed inside, Young began to get among the goals, becoming top scorer in the Blues' promotion in the 1965–66 season and again two years later for the club's first domestic title in 30 years. Cup glory followed, with Young netting the only goal in the 1969 FA Cup Final and the first in a 2-1 win against Górnik Zabrze as City added the European Cup Winners' Cup to their trophy haul.

PAUL POWER

1975–1986

26 A boyhood fan, Power remains one of the most popular City skippers ever. He was also one of the unluckiest, leading out the side he loved at three cup finals only for City to lose them all. Throughout those trophyless years, Power was a constant: a defender whose driving forward runs lived up to his name. Having been handed the captaincy by Malcolm Allison during a campaign in which the club flirted with relegation, the armband seemingly galvanised him as he weighed in with seven goals to keep City up. 436 appearances later, he moved to Everton and at last got the reward his efforts deserved as the Toffees lifted the 1986–87 title.


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor via Getty


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor via Getty

DAVE WATSON

1975–1979

25 The well-travelled defender was already an England international when manager Tony Book signed him from Sunderland, where he'd originally been utilised as a striker before being shifted to centre-back. It was here that Watson was at his best – strong as an ox and never flinching from a tackle, his aggressive style would likely attract the attention of modern referees but in the more lenient times of the late '70s won the admiration of City fans instead. Alongside Blues legends Alan Oakes and Mike Doyle, Watson made City a force to be reckoned with, taking them to a League Cup final victory in 1976 and one point from the title the following season.


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor

JOE CORRIGAN

1967–1983

24 Affectionately dubbed 'Big Joe', Corrigan remains number one in the hearts of a generation of City fans. The 6'4" keeper spent 16 seasons at the club, stretching from the late '60s to the early '80s, during which he amassed a remarkable 603 appearances – a tally beaten only by Alan Oakes. His commanding presence in the box and outstanding shot-stopping abilities helped him to earn City's Player of the Year on three occasions. By the time of his departure to Seattle Sounders in 1983 he'd helped City to four pieces of silverware: two League Cups, a Cup Winners' Cup and a Charity Shield.

PAUL LAKE

1986–1996

23 One of the most naturally gifted City players ever, Lake could so easily have been one of the all-time greats: many would argue that, in kinder circumstances, he'd surely have warranted a place in the top five of this list. Just about the complete midfielder, Lake had a poise and composure that belied his age; not for nothing was he handed the captain's armband at the tender age of 22. But just as his career was taking flight, fate intervened, and an innocuous challenge with Villa's Tony Cascarino saw him rupture his cruciate ligament. His injury was poorly handled by the club, his various treatments proving ineffective. Further heartbreaking setbacks followed, ultimately leading to a premature retirement at just 27.



Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor

TOMMY BOOTH

1967–1981

22 Having joined as an amateur before his 16th birthday, Booth made his professional debut while still just 18, quickly establishing himself at the heart of the City defence. In his first season he proved his value at the other end too, tucking home a last-minute semi-final winner in the FA Cup final of 1969 to take them to Wembley and his first piece of silverware. Two more trophies followed the next season, though by the time he'd added another League Cup to his haul in 1976 the adaptable Booth had been shifted to midfield. By the time he moved to Preston in the early 1980s Booth had notched up almost 500 City appearances, a testament to the dependability of this devoted Blue.


Werner OTTO/ullstein bild via Getty Images


PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

FRED TILSON

1928-1938

21 The Yorkshireman arrived at City from Barnsley alongside team-mate Eric Brook, though he took much longer to make his mark at the Citizens, finding himself in and out of the first team while his former strike partner picked up the plaudits. It wasn't until his fourth season that Tilson started making waves, but once he got started he was hard to stop, racking up 110 goals in just 264 appearances. The highlight of his career was the FA Cup final victory of 1934, in which he gave Frank Swift – at fault for the Portsmouth goal to which City trailed – a half-time pep talk in which he vowed to the keeper that he'd score two in the second half. Tilson kept his promise, scoring the equaliser and a late winner.


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor

BILLY MEREDITH

1894-1906, 1921-1924

20 Some fans would bristle at the inclusion of a player who made more than 300 appearances for Manchester United. But by the time of his arrival at Bank Street (the precursor to Old Trafford) Meredith (left) was past his peak. Yet in his heyday he was the equivalent of a modern-day galáctico, a skilful right-sided forward whose dribbling skills were only matched by his shooting. He became City's top scorer in his first full season in sky blue and was appointed captain. Rough treatment from top-division defenders meant his best-scoring seasons were in the second flight. Bribery accusations led to his departure, but he returned to City at 46. Indeed, he was approaching his 50th birthday when he made his final appearance for the Blues, becoming City's oldest-ever player.


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor

DENNIS TUEART

1974–1978, 1980–1983

19 "Oh, and what a goal! By Tueart! What a goal!" Brian Moore's iconic commentary sums up the highlight of the Geordie winger's career: a stunning overhead-kick winner in the 1976 League Cup final. Tueart had already tasted victory at Wembley having helped Sunderland win the FA Cup in 1973 before transferring to the Citizens. His terrific close control and pace made him a nightmare for defenders to deal with, and in a strong City side he twice came close to further silverware as the Blues narrowly finished runners-up to Liverpool in the 1976–77 Division One season before losing out to Spurs in the famous 1981 FA Cup final replay. Between those two agonising near-misses Tueart spent two years at New York Cosmos, winning three trophies before returning to City in 1980. His goals tended to come in bunches – indeed, he bagged a trio of hat-tricks in a single season – but it's that acrobatic piece of skill that confirmed his place in City folklore.

FRANK SWIFT

1933–1949

18 City were struggling to find a reliable pair of hands between the sticks when the Blackpool-born goalkeeper made his debut a day before his 20th birthday. It was an ignominious start, with Swift conceding four, but in the corresponding fixture just a day later he kept a clean sheet. Swift went on to play all but one game in the years afterwards until WWII broke out (without him, City let in six against Millwall). His height and shovel-like hands made it difficult for opposition forwards to find a way past him, and while he blamed himself for conceding in the 1934 FA Cup final, a string of saves helped City secure the trophy. War robbed him of more appearances as the Football League was suspended but he continued to play in the non-competitive Wartime League before returning to action, eventually retiring in 1949. His post-career switch to football journalism sadly ended in tragedy, as he died in the Munich Air Disaster, aged just 44.


Charles Hewitt / Stringer


Westey / Stringer

TONY BOOK

1966–1974

17 This former bricklayer's professional career began with a lie: he was nearly 30 when Malcolm Allison, who'd worked with Book at Bath City, convinced the player to doctor his birth certificate, believing Plymouth wouldn't pay the fee if they knew his real age. Two years later, both were at City, Allison convincing a reluctant Joe Mercer that Book was the real deal even as he approached 32. The coach was right: before long, Book was made captain and became the club's first Player of the Year. Over the next four seasons he led the Blues to silverware, including the Cup Winners' Cup. Upon retirement he became assistant manager before assuming full charge six months later and leading City to the 1976 League Cup.


Mirrorpix / Contributor

GLYN PARDOE

1962–1976

15 While Book didn't make his Blues' debut until he was in his thirties, City's Mr Versatile was still 51 days away from his 16th birthday when he first pulled on the shirt: a record unlikely to ever be beaten. Utilised as a forward, Pardoe's time at City got off to a stuttering start, and he found himself in and out of the team. Yet just as they transformed the club's fortunes, Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison reinvigorated the still-teenaged Pardoe's career, installing him at left-back as he became a regular starter. His experience up front and in midfield had served him well, affording him a calmness on the ball that made him a distinctively cultured presence at the back. He played a significant role during the golden years that followed, though he was never quite the same after a leg-breaker of a tackle from United's George Best caused him to lose almost two years to injury. Yet this dedicated one-club man persevered, happy to fill in whenever and wherever until his retirement in 1976.

TOMMY JOHNSON

1919–1930

16 A scorer during the first league game at Maine Road, Johnson (right) would go on to have a street named after him near City's former ground. And no wonder: until Eric Brook's arrival, he was City's top goalscorer, and his tally of 158 league goals matches Brook's, the latter only ahead by dint of his cup goals. Amazingly, the only honour Johnson won at City was the Second Division – yet despite the club's fluctuating fortunes, this prolific striker was a consistent performer. He had his best season in City's return to the top flight, scoring 38 goals in 39 games, still a club record – including five in a single match against Everton. That was enough to earn him a place in the England side, where his meagre five caps saw him bag as many goals. Astonishingly, City's management decided to sell him to Everton in 1930.


Mark Leech/Offside/ Contributor

ERIC BROOK

1928–1939


PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

14 Strictly speaking, Brook was a left winger, but the sinewy Yorkshireman was not content with hugging the touchline, frequently coming inside to score goals as well as create them. His muscularity gave him fearsome power in his shots, which he'd often attempt from outrageous distance (one cup goal against Stoke is widely considered one of the best ever scored at Maine Road) while his roving brief gave him licence to terrorise both full-backs and centre-halves. His goals helped City to Wembley in 1934, and he set up the winner for Fred Tilson as the Citizens triumphed 2-1 over Portsmouth. He also played a crucial role in the first title-winning season of 1936–37, playing every game in a campaign that included a stirring 20-match unbeaten run. By the time he hung up his boots he'd scored 177 goals, becoming City's all-time leading goalscorer. His record would stand for almost eight decades until finally being topped by Sergio Agüero in 2017.

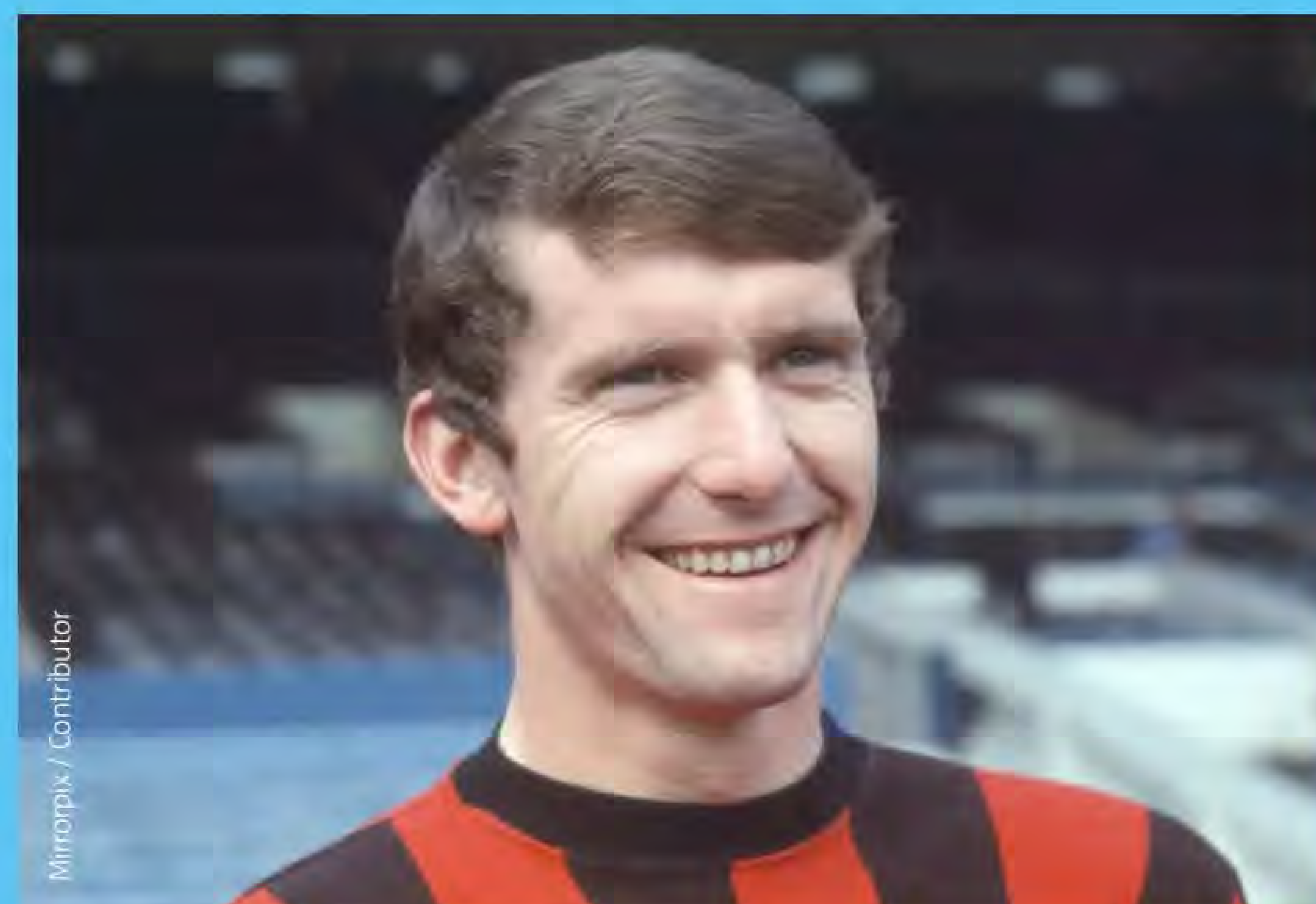


Mirrorpix / Contributor

FRANCIS LEE

1967–1974

12 After scoring at the rate of almost a goal every other game at Bolton, Lee was signed by Joe Mercer for what at the time was City's record transfer fee. Mercer called him "the final piece of the jigsaw" – and sure enough the barrel-chested forward slotted neatly into place from the start, scoring in his second game and netting a further 14 times before the crucial final game of the season against Newcastle. Lee scored again in a 4-3 win to help the Citizens to their first-ever league title. The FA Cup was added to City's trophy cabinet the following season before a run of five seasons in which Lee was the Blues' top scorer. Stocky and fearless, he was particularly deadly from 12 yards, regularly scoring penalties (many of which he'd earned himself, his tendency to go down easily attracting some controversy). Indeed, his 35-goal haul in the 1971–72 season included a record 15 spot-kicks.


Mirrorpix / Contributor

MIKE DOYLE

1965–1978

13 An outstanding – and outspoken – defender, Doyle was the rock at the heart of the City defence during the club's most fruitful period outside Pep Guardiola's reign. A boyhood fan, his fiercely committed performances earned him a reputation as a hardman, and his open dislike of United attracted plenty of attention from the press – and angry supporters from the red half of Manchester. But he relished the pressure of a local derby, rarely ending up on the losing team throughout his time at the Citizens, and his passion for the club shone through in his attitude on the pitch. By the time he left his beloved Blues for Stoke in 1978, he'd reached 563 appearances, leaving him third in City's all-time list, behind Joe Corrigan and Alan Oakes. Doyle sadly passed away from liver failure ten years ago, but his City legacy lives on through grandson Tommy, a talented young midfielder.

MIKE SUMMERBEE

1965–1975

11 "The greatest centre-forward in history", according to City fans in a back-and-forth chant with their neighbours, the rest of which we won't repeat here. Yet the man known as 'Buzzer' to his team-mates spent more of his time on the wing, where he quickly became a real crowd favourite. Arriving from Swindon – as son Nicky would do almost 30 years later – he immediately established himself in Joe Mercer's side, playing all 52 competitive games and scoring ten goals as City were promoted to the top tier. Two years later, they were champions, Summerbee weighing in with 20 goals in his best scoring season, while he provided the assist for Neil Young's decisive strike in the '69 FA Cup final. Despite their on-pitch rivalry, Summerbee was firm friends with United's George Best, sharing the Irishman's hard-living lifestyle. But the late nights only endeared this charismatic entertainer to the fans: he remains one of the most popular players of the era and now holds an ambassadorial role at the club.



Evening Standard via Getty

FERNANDINHO

2013–2022


Peter Powell / Contributor via Getty

10 There have been bigger-name signings during the Sheikh Mansour era. There have been players with more impressive stats, more assists, more goals. Yet the Brazilian has easily been one of the most influential figures of the last eight seasons: a midfield enforcer whose unsung hard work allows City's flair players to command the back-page headlines. Fernandinho is undoubtedly a master of one of football's dark arts – you'll struggle to find a better tactical fouler in Premier League history – but you'll find guile, craft and creativity in his game too. His raking diagonal passes have launched many an attack, and there are few City players you'd want to see running onto a dropping ball around 30 yards out, one laser-like strike against Stoke the pick of his occasional screamers. Despite Pep Guardiola's fondness for rotation, he had played more than 300 games in all competitions before the 2020–21 campaign – during which he lifted his first two trophies as club captain. Little wonder that, even at 36 years of age City were keen to secure his services for one more year.

YAYA TOURÉ

2010–2018


AMA/WAITES / Stringer

09 A manufactured controversy about missing birthday cake and ill-judged accusations against Pep Guardiola shouldn't diminish Touré's many achievements in sky blue. It's easy to forget that many scoffed when the Ivorian signed for £24m from Barcelona, some pundits believing he was no improvement on the defensive midfielders already at the club. But Roberto Mancini cannily deployed him further forward in the Premier League, where his crisp passes, lung-bursting runs and powerful shots made him an increasingly influential figure. With the only goals in both the semi-final and final of the 2011 FA Cup, Touré earned City their first trophy in 35 years. The league title came the following season, though it was under Manuel Pellegrini in 2013–14 that Touré was at his brilliant best, scoring an astonishing equaliser to help City turn around the Capital One Cup final and netting 20 goals – including a succession of unstoppable free-kicks – to pretty much single-handedly drag the Blues over the line as they dramatically secured another title on the final day.

ALAN OAKES

1959–1976


Mirrorpix / Contributor

08 Tasked with cleaning the boots of City's much-loved goalkeeper Bert Trautmann, a 15-year-old Oakes surely could never have dreamed how his career would turn out. Almost two decades later, when he left to become player-manager at Third Division Chester, Oakes had become City's all-time record appearance holder – and it's hard to imagine his tally of 680 will be beaten in the modern era. That's a testament to Oakes' longevity but also his professionalism and loyalty: a model servant to the club, his no-fuss style helped him quietly become the beating heart of the City side from the late '50s through to the mid '70s.


PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

PETER DOHERTY

1936–1945

07 Those old enough to have watched this flame-haired Irish winger in his pomp will tell you he's not only the most skilful player they've ever seen but one of the hardest workers too. An inside-left capable of bewildering his markers with his close control and mesmerising body swerves, he arrived from Blackpool in 1930 – though it wasn't until his first full season that he made his mark. The 1936–37 campaign was a season of two halves for City, but Doherty's goals were a thrilling constant, and when the team clicked into gear after Christmas, he continued to bang them in, his 11 in the final seven games helping the Blues clinch the title on the final day. He scored another 25 in the following season, though that wasn't enough to prevent the champions from being dramatically relegated. By the time war broke out he'd scored an astonishing 79 goals in just 130 appearances, and he continued his prodigious rate of scoring in the non-competitive Wartime League, bagging another 60 in 89 matches.

KEVIN DE BRUYNE

2015– present


Mark Leech/Offside / Contributor

06 With just three appearances in two years for Chelsea, the Belgian's first experience of the Premier League was not a happy one. Yet he subsequently flourished in the Bundesliga with Wolfsburg, his 44 goal contributions earning him Germany's Footballer of the Year. Upon his return to English football for a £55m fee De Bruyne quickly set about silencing the doubters. A week after his City debut he scored his first goal; the following April, a crisp, curling strike from the edge of the box took City to the semi-finals of the Champions League for the first time ever. Deployed in a deeper role under Pep Guardiola, he soon became the league's assist king, combining astonishing vision with peerless technique on a consistent basis, delivering Man of the Match displays week after week. Capable of powerful, driving runs and possessing the ability to score with both feet, De Bruyne is now widely regarded as the best midfielder in the league. In a team of superstars, he regularly shines brightest of all.

VINCENT KOMPANY

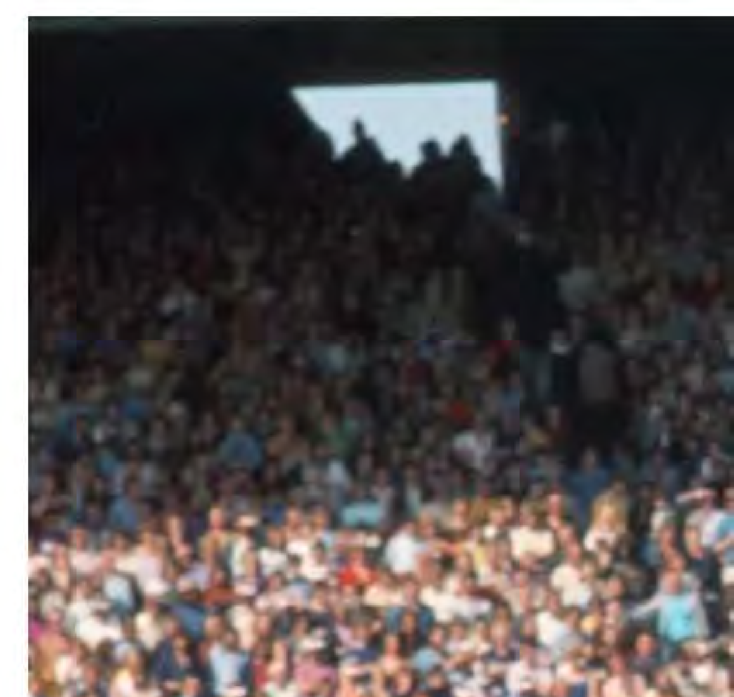
2008–2019

05 An inspiration. An institution. The most Mancunian Belgian that ever lived. Were it not for his proneness to injury, City's greatest leader would easily be top-three material – it's testament to how well he's performed when available for selection that he makes it ahead of his fellow compatriot De Bruyne. Signed from Hamburg in 2008 for an undisclosed fee (believed to be around £6m) Kompany represents one of the biggest bargains in City history. Initially used as a defensive midfielder, the Belgian was shifted to centre-back, where he began to exert his influence. An authoritative yet composed presence at the back, Kompany was obvious captain material and was duly given the armband for the 2011–12 season as he led his team to City's first league trophy in four decades – scoring a vital goal against closest rivals United in the penultimate home game with a towering header and securing the individual honour of Premier League Player of the Season. As the years wore on he would miss more games than he played, yet Kompany was determined to write a happy ending to his City fairytale. His blistering 30-yard drive against Leicester proved the pivotal moment in the 2018–19 title race, helping City maintain an extraordinary winning run of 14 games that saw them pip Liverpool by a single point.



Getty Images


Adrian Dennis/AFP via Getty Images




Edward Miller / Stringer

BERT TRAUTMANN

1949–1964

04 Trautmann's story is a reminder that real life can write more compelling drama than any screenwriter. A paratrooper in the Luftwaffe during World War II, he was captured by the British army towards the conflict's end and brought to a Lancashire POW camp. Upon his release, Trautmann stayed in the area and began to make a name for himself playing for local side St Helens Town as a goalkeeper – his height, reach and natural athleticism making him a fine stopper. In late 1949, he signed a contract with City, much to the consternation of fans, who protested the German's arrival due to his wartime exploits. Supporters' boos soon subsided, however, as Trautmann produced a string of impressive performances in goal – although he continued to be barracked by away fans. With the eyes of the London-based media watching, his heroics in keeping the score down in a game against Fulham saw him earn a standing ovation from players and supporters alike, and his reputation grew from there. The defining moment of his City career would come in the FA Cup final in 1956. With the Citizens leading 3-1, Trautmann bravely dived at the feet of Birmingham's Peter Murphy, the collision leaving him with a broken neck. Astonishingly, Trautmann played on, making further saves to preserve the score. It was only after three days that the full extent of his injury was discovered.



SERGIO AGÜERO

2011–2021

03 There's really only one possible place to start. On Sunday, 13 May 2012, with the clock ticking past the 93-minute mark, City are drawing 2-2 with Queens Park Rangers and on the verge of handing the title to their most hated rivals in a game expected to be a formality. Seconds later, Sergio Agüero collects a return pass from Mario Balotelli and takes a touch as Rangers defender Taye Taiwo lunges in with a tackle, almost connecting with the Argentinian's right ankle. Somehow, in this fiercest of crucibles, with the stakes at their highest, Agüero manages to stay ice-cool, using that same right foot to unleash an unstoppable strike past Paddy Kenny at his near post to send the City fans into ecstatic rapture. It had been 44 years since City's last top-flight title and with the last meaningful kick of the season they had pipped United to English football's most coveted prize by two points. Were that all Agüero had contributed to City, his name would be forever chiselled into club folklore. But this was just one of a record number of goals (260 in 390 appearances) and a litany of iconic moments in sky blue. Not just a great scorer of goals, but a scorer of great goals – near-post thunderbolts, delicate chips, slaloming solo strikes – Agüero's departure on a free-transfer to a cash-strapped Barcelona left the Premier League without one of the finest forwards the English game has ever witnessed.



Mirrorpix / Contributor

COLIN BELL

1966–1979

02 As a teenager at Bury, Bell had attracted the attention of a number of big clubs. City's assistant manager Malcolm Allison, however, seemed unimpressed, loudly pointing out his weaknesses. It was all a ruse: Allison had aimed to sow the seeds of doubt among rivals for his signature so City could secure his services. In truth, he had no doubt whatsoever about the man he nicknamed 'Nijinsky', after the famous racehorse famed for his stamina. Bell was indeed a thoroughbred: he combined natural athleticism with remarkable intelligence, an unexpected turn of pace, a shot as powerful as any striker, and an unparalleled delicacy of touch. He moved with the grace of a dancer in the famous 'ballet on ice', where City demolished a strong Spurs side on a snow-covered pitch, while a glorious through-ball with the outside of his right foot played in Francis Lee for the decisive fourth goal against Newcastle that secured the First Division title in 1968. A terrible tackle from United's Martin Buchan ultimately curtailed his career, but it's testament to the man known as The King of the Kippax (the part of Maine Road that held City's most raucous supporters) that he now has a stand named after him.

DAVID SILVA

2010–2020

01 Every so often, a footballer comes along who seems to be playing a different game to those around them. So it was with the Spanish midfield maestro, known as Merlin to team-mates for his preternatural ability to conjure something from nothing. City had been chasing Silva for two years when he finally put pen to paper in 2010, though many believed he didn't have the right build to cope with the Premier League's physical demands. Yet this quiet, humble little genius had heard it all before: as a youngster, he'd often dominated games against bigger, older opponents. It wasn't long before he was regularly collecting Man of the Match awards, scoring a scintillating individual goal against Blackpool for his first in the league. Yet Silva was much more often the provider: his sumptuous volleyed pass to Edin Džeko in the 6-1 derby win at Old Trafford signified a seismic power-shift in the city. With an unmatched appreciation of space, he had the uncanny knack of finding pockets of calm in even the most chaotic games. Regularly dictating the tempo of attacks, he'd often prove the key to unlocking even the tightest defence. And in his darkest moment, with his prematurely born son Mateo fighting for his life in Spain, a shaven-headed Silva somehow summoned the inner strength to produce some of his very best form. Now *that's* magic.



Getty Images

DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER

Words Chris Flanagan
Portraits Nick Eagle
Thanks to Colossal Sports Management



Raheem Sterling faced plenty of criticism early in his Manchester City career, but he overcame it to become a hero for club and country. Now, the Three Lions forward tells *FFT* how he proved the doubters wrong

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
AUTUMN 2019

"Oh my gosh!"

FourFourTwo are deep within Manchester City's incredible Etihad Campus training facility, and an eight-year-old's jaw has just dropped.

This early autumn evening, we are inside a vast indoor hall, and on one side of a dividing curtain, a training session for one of the club's junior squads is taking place. On the other side of the curtain, Raheem Sterling is posing for a photo shoot with *FFT*.

The youngsters are oblivious that Sterling is just yards away – that is, until a stray football finds its way around the curtain. A kid arrives to retrieve it, and suddenly he finds himself staring straight at an England superstar. Not only does his jaw hit the floor, he nearly faints with excitement. 'Oh my gosh' indeed.

Mysteriously, a number of stray footballs then start to arrive in the next few minutes. Every time the ball somehow finds its way around the curtain – completely accidentally, of course – another child appears to catch a glimpse of their hero. The man himself just smiles modestly. Adoration hasn't always come Sterling's way, but things have started to change over the past year or two.

Sterling has been helping to write history at Manchester City, bagging an unprecedented domestic treble last season, and we asked him to don a couple of historic kits today: a classic 1989 home strip, and the famous fluorescent shirt that Paul Dickov & Co. wore in the 1999 play-off final, when City overcame Tony Pulis' Gillingham at the old Wembley to claw their way out of the third tier.

FFT last met Sterling three years ago. Back then, he was noticeably quiet at first, before gradually becoming more comfortable and talkative as time went on. Today's interview is following a similar pattern. Sterling is 24 now, but there's not a lot of small talk as he poses for photos. He's being perfectly polite, but he is sussing us out. He has been burned so often by the media in the past that it's completely understandable. Sterling needs to establish some trust, rather than open up immediately.

As we sit down to talk, he begins to relax. This, after all, is a man who has started to find his voice in recent times, both on and off the field. This is a man increasingly willing to stand up against injustice, while developing into one of the finest footballers on the planet.

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CRISTIANO RONALDO

It's the latter point that we want to explore first, and much of it revolves around one thing: goals. For four seasons between 2013 and 2017, Sterling's goalscoring for club and country flatlined: 10 goals, 12 goals, 12 goals, 10 goals. While it was a perfectly respectable set of returns for a player who has never been an out-and-out forward, those tallies didn't do full justice to the talent he possessed.

Then came the 2017-18 season: 23 goals. And in the 2018-19 campaign: 31. When we meet in mid-September, he has eight goals from his first seven games of 2019-20. Has it been the best form of his career to date?

"Yeah, I'd say so," Sterling tells *FFT*, adding, "Especially because it's not been for a month or two months – I've been consistent for over two-and-a-half or three years now.

"I went through a patch that was difficult for any 19-year-old or 20-year-old, and it's about how you come out the other side. It's about the belief you have in yourself, and working really hard. It's about age, experience, correcting mistakes that you've made in the past and not crying – just trying to get better."

It's about listening to his mother, too. For years, she would keep nagging him with one simple question: "Why don't you get into the box more?" Eventually, he relented.

"Yeah, she's happy now!" confesses Sterling, laughing. "There's no point being out on the left wing constantly if the goals are inside the box. My mum is proud of me, and that makes me happy."

He has learned from playing alongside the goal king at Manchester City: Sergio Agüero (below). "I look at Sergio's finishes," explains Sterling. "Sometimes, if I see a player score a certain type of goal, I'll think, 'OK, cool, it's interesting how he did that'."

Sterling's goal explosion in recent seasons has prompted comparisons with a player who experienced the same thing in his early twenties despite not playing as a striker. "There's a similarity with Cristiano Ronaldo's development at Manchester United," Jamie Carragher wrote recently.

Sterling is keen to emphasise that he doesn't see himself as being on Ronaldo's level, but he acknowledges that there may be several similarities in their career paths.

"As you get older, you start realising what's the most important thing in football," says the City star. "In the younger age groups, you want to show the world and your manager that you've got ability. You want to do your dribbles, and you forget about scoring goals. It's not your main priority.

"When Cristiano was 13 up to the age of 16, he will have been scoring the most goals in his youth groups. But then he became a professional for the first time, like I became a professional for the first time, and you want to show everyone you've got ability, so you start doing all the fancy footwork.

"After a while, people start to say, 'He needs to score more goals.' ▸





"AT TIMES LAST SEASON, WE THOUGHT WE MAY HAVE BLOWN IT. ONCE WE HAD GOT BACK ON TOP, WE WEREN'T LETTING GO"

Images PA Images/Getty Images


M.C.F.C.

Then you actually wake up and realise: 'Oh, maybe I do', and you put the work in. I think that's what he did, and it's similar with me. But I'm not comparing the two of us, because he's one of the best players who has ever played the game.

"I scored 31 goals for club and country last year, so I need to do even better now. That's just me as a person: if I've done something, I need to do it better next time. If I get more than 31 this season, I need to go higher the year after. It's a challenge, but you have to live up to that, because we're in an industry where you're judged on these things.

"It's not just because you're judged, though. The more I'm firing, and the more that others in our strike force are firing, the more likely it is that we're going to win trophies."

Cristiano Ronaldo became an out-and-out striker in his advancing years, so can Sterling envisage a situation in the future where he does the same? "I think so," he says. "I enjoy being in the box, so hopefully one day, yeah."

"IN LONDON, SOMETHING CAN KICK OFF AT ANY MOMENT. YOU TRY TO DEFUSE IT"

In 1999, a few months after Dickov's famous equaliser at Wembley, a five-year-old Sterling arrived in north-west London from Jamaica, living in close vicinity to what were then the Twin Towers. The famous old stadium would soon be demolished, but from an early age he dreamed of playing at the new one, as it gradually rose from the ground.

"Football was everything I thought about," he says. "I remember my first Sunday League team in Kingsbury, and getting my first pair of Nike boots. The only thing I ever wanted to do was go to those training sessions, play in those weekend games, and play in the tournaments that came every couple of months."

Sterling joined the Queens Park Rangers youth system in 2003. He idolised Ronaldinho, and later Lionel Messi, but aged 14 he found a hero at closer quarters: Adel Taarabt, who had arrived at Loftus Road from Tottenham. "He was a left-winger when I was at QPR and what he could do with a football was crazy to me!" says Sterling, giggling as he remembers watching the Moroccan, who is now 30 and playing for Benfica. "Because of his ability, I'm kind of disappointed not to see him playing at the highest level now. I'm not saying he's not at the highest level, but he could have been at an even bigger team than he is now."

Rangers had been rocked in May 2006 by the murder of 15-year-old youth-team player Kiyan Prince, stabbed to death in the Edgware district of north London. This season, QPR's home ground has been renamed the Kiyan Prince Foundation Stadium. "I didn't know Kiyan personally, because he was a few years older than me," says Sterling. "But from what I hear, he was a fantastic player. It was really tragic how he died."

Sterling admits that he, too, experienced dangerous situations as a youngster





Images: PA Images

"I THINK PEOPLE UNDERSTAND ME NOW. THEY CAN SEE THE TRUTH AND IGNORE WHAT THEY HAVE HEARD ABOUT ME BEFORE"

growing up in the English capital. "London can get like that sometimes," he explains. "You grow up in some of these areas, and at any moment something can kick off. You have kids who are a similar age, and they might see you're from a different area and want to take something off you. You think, 'No, I'm not giving it to you', and it gets out of hand for no reason. There have been many times in London where things have got sticky, as we say. You just try to be mature, and defuse it."

Sterling's life took a very different path when he turned 15: he was snapped up by Liverpool in February 2010. As well as the obvious career benefits, it helped him to escape the dangers of London. Homesickness was never an issue.

"Mate, I loved every minute of it," he says of what could have been a challenging move to the other end of the country. "It was probably the best thing to happen to me at the time – moving, changing my space, going into a new environment. I got out of London and was in a space where I was by myself, with my house parents and the other kids there. It was like God gave me a new beginning – somewhere I could be alone and focus."

Within two seasons, Sterling had become the third-youngest player in the Reds' history, aged 17 years and 107 days when Kenny Dalglish introduced him as an 84th-minute substitute in a Premier League fixture against Wigan. "It was a beautiful moment," he says with a smile on his face. "I remember thinking, 'I can't wait to get on the pitch at Anfield – and as soon as I get the ball, I'm doing stepovers. I don't care where I am; I'm trying to beat the first player that comes to me!'"

How many stepovers did he manage in his brief time on the pitch? "I think I got in three or four!" he says, bursting out laughing.

In only his third campaign in the first-team squad, Sterling found himself in a Liverpool team heading for the Premier League title. Everyone knows how that season ended. For Steven Gerrard, at 33, it was his last chance of Premier League success. Sterling was only 19. He surely knew that he'd have other chances later in his career. Did that soften the blow?

"It didn't make it easier, because we were so close," he says. "We had to outscore teams a lot of the time in that season, but we were brilliant at times. At the start of that season, we didn't know we would be right up there all the way to the end. I wasn't thinking about anything that would happen afterwards; I just wanted to win it that season. It was hard to take – a real low."

That title chase would be the beginning of the end of his time at Liverpool. Within a year, he had joined Manchester City, having been unable to agree a new contract at Anfield. It was a decision that led to criticism, both from Liverpool fans and from some further afield.

Sterling feels that he has talked about that controversial move often enough now, and is reluctant to go over old ground, but he admits that the criticism affected him during his early days at Manchester City. Form and confidence suffered, and so criticism increased further. It became a vicious circle.

"It was more difficult than I expected," he reveals of that early period as a City player. "You're young and you've been brought in as the most expensive English player at the time. You're in a new bubble and you're adapting to things, which can be a lot for a 20-year-old. Then, at the same time, what came with it off the field didn't help me on the field.

"If I had come here and hadn't been getting the criticism I had been getting off the field, I guarantee you it would have been a different story. I was 19 or 20, and people were giving me the worst criticism you can ever think of. It was hard to take, because you're young and you don't understand why. Maybe six months before that, they were giving me lots of praise. All of a sudden, it was: 'He isn't good enough'."

It bred doubts, which bred mistakes. "Those mistakes were more within myself, ▶

THE RACE TO 50 CAPS

In June 2019, Sterling became the third-youngest player to reach the half-century for England – Shilts was in his 30s...

WAYNE ROONEY	MICHAEL OWEN	RAHEEM STERLING	BOBBY MOORE	STEVEN GERRARD	DAVID BECKHAM	PETER SHILTON
23	23	24	25	26	27	33

not about my ability," he says. "It was about self-belief. When things aren't going well, when people talk about you in a bad light, it's not easy to hear that. It's in your head, playing with you.

"If I had a bad first touch, or didn't beat my defender, I'd get down about it. I don't really think like that now. I think, 'Yeah, I've not had the best half, but in the second half I'll score'."

Taking less notice of social media has helped. "When you're young, you want to know what people are saying about you," he admits. "But the less you see, the better. If you don't see something, it can't affect you.

"As I've got older, I've come to realise that criticism is part of the game. It doesn't change who you are as a person and it doesn't change who you are as a footballer, either. The part I can control is what I do on the football field. I'm a person who wants to prove people wrong all of the time."

"PEOPLE DIDN'T WANT ME IN THE ENGLAND TEAM. I KNEW I HAD TO PICK UP MY LEVEL"

The process of proving people wrong really kicked into gear in the 2017-18 season. Early in the campaign, reports suggested that City had offered Sterling as a makeweight in a bid to sign Alexis Sanchez from Arsenal. It was speculated in some corners that after two seasons at the Etihad Stadium, in which City finished 4th and 3rd, the Englishman might be surplus to requirements.

But Sterling soon received reassurance from director of football Txiki Begiristain. "The club shut it down straight away," he tells us now. "I spoke to Txiki and he said, 'No, it's not true. We wouldn't be selling you; we wouldn't be swapping you for anyone'." Later, City publicly revealed that it had been Arsenal who wanted to include Sterling in the deal. The Sky Blues had instantly refused.

From that moment on, Sterling has never looked back. He started to score frequently as City began their march to the Premier League title. He singles out a 96th-minute winner at home to Southampton in November as his personal highlight of that campaign. "RAHEEM STERLING! THAT. WINS. TITLES!" bellowed the TV commentator as Sterling found the top corner from outside the box and charged off to celebrate like a man possessed, while Pep Guardiola leapt around in joy on the sideline. "That was literally the last kick of the game," says Sterling. "We needed those three points."

By the end of that season, City had a record 100 points and Sterling had his first Premier League winner's medal. "That was something I'd dreamed of – it was *the* trophy I'd been obsessed with as a kid," he says. "To finally get my hands on it, and to finally get that medal... there's no better feeling."

Another title followed, despite the sternest of tests to overcome Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool. How tough was it to face that challenge?

"Tough? No, not tough – it's brilliant!" says Sterling. "You don't want to be the only team in the league that wins football matches. You don't want to play against the easy teams and win 5-0 every game. Yes, it's nice, but if you win 5-0 every weekend, what's the point of playing? It's good to have these teams that are going to be competitive – as long as they don't beat us too many times, of course! It's brilliant to be involved in.

"At times last season, we were all thinking, 'We may have blown this one'. But we kept going until we got back on top, and once we got back on top, we weren't letting that go."

On November 10, Manchester City will face Liverpool in the Premier League at Anfield. For years, Sterling was unable to produce his best form when he faced his former club – his first 10 games against Liverpool brought zero goals, and he admits that he always felt a bit awkward about playing the Reds.

"Yeah, because it was a club that gave me my football career," he says. "They invested a lot of money and time in me, so every time I go there or play them, I get flashbacks... not just of playing for the first team, or even the youth team, but putting on the shirt for the first time in my first under-18s derby against Everton – things like that. Sometimes I think, 'I used to be in that shirt'."

At Wembley for the Community Shield in August, Sterling finally broke his duck against Liverpool. "I was really happy to score my first goal against them," he tells *FFT*. "Having not scored against them for so long, I need to try to make up for lost time now. When people keep reminding you that you haven't scored, then once the first one goes in, the next time you're a lot more confident."

Perhaps the biggest turning point of Sterling's England career occurred at one such moment. After netting against Estonia in October 2015, he went 27 internationals without scoring for his country, spanning a disastrous Euro 2016 campaign and even a promising World Cup. In Russia, he undoubtedly played well, but did everything apart from score.

"Raheem Sterling has now gone 1,000 days without scoring for England," one



"EVERY TIME WE PLAY LIVERPOOL I GET FLASHBACKS. I SOMETIMES THINK, 'I WAS IN THAT SHIRT'"

Above Sterling finally scored against his old club... **Right** ...and picked up another trophy, too

Images PA Images/Getty Images

newspaper website proclaimed after Gareth Southgate's men beat Colombia in the Last 16. Considering Sterling had just played his part in one of the Three Lions' most euphoric nights in years, the headline drew widespread criticism.

Popular opinion was slowly starting to turn back in his favour – and then came a Nations League clash with Spain in Seville. Sterling hit two goals before half-time, and the floodgates opened. A hat-trick followed against the Czech Republic. He meets *FFT* on the back of eight goals in his last eight England appearances.

The goal drought now seems like a distant memory. "It all came on the back of having bad press; it all came because I had a stigma," reveals Sterling. "I had people looking at me in a certain way, and people were judging me before I even went onto the football field for England.

"I just believe that people were ready to… they didn't want me in the national team. Even if I was doing well for my club, they didn't want me in the national team. That was the feeling I had at the time, and it puts you down. It puts you in a low place. You want to be the best you can be for your national team, but if you don't have that love, which I didn't think I was getting, it makes you…" His sentence tails off as he attempts to choose his words carefully.



"I knew that I had to pick up my level," he continues. "If people were having me or not, I had to show them I wanted to be there, and I really wanted to make up for lost time after a few disappointing seasons with the national team. Once those two goals went in against Spain, I knew from there that this is something I'll be doing on a regular basis for England now. I felt even more confident to be there, to have the reception I was getting afterwards from people on the outside, the fans. I just needed to put the ball in the back of the net, and everything would come after that. I think it's flowing now.

"I believe people understand me now – they can see the truth and ignore what they have heard about me previously. They see that I'm a person who only wants to do the best for the national team."

What they were hearing – or, rather, reading – was a stream of media coverage giving the impression that Sterling was somehow flashy, flaunting his wealth. From ▶

"HE'S TOUGH, HE'S BRILLIANT, HE'S OURS"

Steven McInerney, YouTubing City fan, shares why Sterling is a fans' favourite

It was hard not to get excited when City signed Raheem Sterling. What's better than signing a rival's explosively talented young forward, let alone one who had just been named European football's Golden Boy, voted as the best under-21 player on the continent? Sterling's arrival weakened Liverpool and made us stronger. Perfect.

It should have been the boost we needed. Manuel Pellegrini's side were slowing down. The spark and the pace that made City so exciting to watch in his first season were gone. We needed goals, flair and speed. Sterling, unfortunately, didn't change that.

An early hat-trick against Bournemouth outlined his frightening potential, but we saw only glimpses of his talent as City's season floundered. Those daring, exciting runs disappeared, as he became hesitant on the ball. Supporters started to question whether he was all that in the first place. There were audible grumbles in the stands and he didn't yet have the mental fortitude to carry a side riddled with doubts.

Then Pep Guardiola happened. Not for a second do I want to undermine Sterling's own role in his remarkable improvement, but Pep's arrival certainly kick-started his renaissance. It wasn't all plain sailing, as Guardiola's first year was a season of ups and downs and failed ideas – for Sterling, too – but Pep persisted. He laughed off the reports linking Sterling to Arsenal and, with devastating effect, set about igniting the fire he needed. Sterling looked confident and became the main beneficiary of a side set up to supply such an intelligent player.

He was notably braver. His fortunes in front of goal improved. He was a different beast. A Champions League tie at Napoli highlighted his improvement perfectly. He was exceptional, taking the fight to them, running at their defence time and again.

A lot of the credit has to go to the player himself, too. It takes exceptional mental fortitude to deal with the abuse he faced. Lesser players understandably could have crumbled, but Sterling didn't. He shouldn't have had to suffer the abuse, but it's made his turnaround and current performances even sweeter. He's grown so much at City that it almost feels as if he's one of our own now. We're fiercely defensive of him.

A timid lad became a ferociously bold man – and he did it at our club. Despite everything, he's become England's best player. What's not to love about that?

He's tough. He's brilliant. And he's ours.

Follow Steven on Twitter @StevenMcinerney or the Esteemed Kompany YouTube channel

our meetings with the man himself, it's not the impression we get at all – particularly in those early minutes after arrival, when he is assessing the situation. He is far from brash.

"I'm someone who likes to observe, look at people and understand who I'm speaking to before I open up," he admits. "That's how I've been ever since I was young."

Sterling adds, "But you hear things and run with it," returning to the constant suggestions that he was flashy. "I hear things about people and sometimes believe them. It's natural: you judge people before you meet them. But thank you for that," he adds, appreciative that we were as baffled by the descriptions as he was.

A couple of months after England's win in Spain came perhaps the final crucial moment in the transformation of Sterling's popularity: the moment when he was brave enough to speak out about press coverage, after he was racially abused at Chelsea. As well as receiving plaudits for his exceptional performances on the field, Sterling has gained admiration around the nation for being willing to talk about wider issues.

"You get a lot of compliments and a lot of love for standing up for yourself, and not just yourself, but a whole society," he says. "I feel a lot of love whenever I'm out and about – not just from City fans, but from the majority.

Although Sterling doesn't wish to delve too deeply into the issue of racism in this particular interview, preferring to focus on football, he admits that he now feels much more confident in speaking out about things, no matter what the subject. "When you're young, you don't really want to upset anyone," he admits. "You don't want any more noise than you're already getting, so you bite your tongue and leave it. But if you have something you feel strongly about, then no matter what position you're in, there's no reason why you shouldn't have that right to speak."



"BRO, IF I'M SCORING 60 GOALS A YEAR FOR 15 YEARS, *THEN* YOU CAN COMPARE ME WITH MESSI"

Above Sorry, Arsenal: Guardiola was never going to sell Sterling

CHAMPIONS LEAGUES AND BALLONS D'OR

At club level, there's one obvious thing missing from Sterling's impressive trophy collection: the Champions League. In 2017-18, City went out to Liverpool after a Leroy Sané goal was disallowed, despite replays showing that it should have stood. Last season, hope was snatched away in a fashion even more cruel.

Sterling sprinted off to celebrate a dramatic stoppage-time winner at home to Tottenham that also completed his hat-trick, only for VAR to intervene, deciding that Sergio Agüero had been marginally offside in the build-up. "One year, if there had been VAR, we would still have been in it," says Sterling. "The next year, when VAR came in, we would have been in the semis if it hadn't been there.

"It was an amazing feeling when I scored against Spurs. There's no feeling that can beat that, for me – scoring a late winner at home in the Champions League, to go through to the semi-finals. Then you see VAR going up on the board and you say, 'Yeah, they're not going to rule it out – we're onside'. Then it's disallowed and you're out. You've had the best feeling in the world, then the worst feeling in the world.

"I have no doubt that we will eventually win the Champions League, even if it's not in my time here. But I have belief that it will be in my time – that we will win the Champions League. If we do, it would be the pinnacle of my career so far, most definitely."

He was named Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year back in April; finally win the Champions League and it might move him into contention for global honours such as the Ballon d'Or. "You look at players who can be crowned the future best in the world and you think of Neymar, [Kylian] Mbappe, [Mohamed] Salah and Sterling," Xavi said recently. "At the moment, Sterling is winning that race."

Sterling admits the Ballon d'Or is a career ambition. "Yeah, for sure, it's a dream of mine," he says. "A lot of players probably won't say it, but it's a dream of every player. Every player wants to be the best in the world. There's a lot of work to do, though. You need to be doing it consistently, and you need to win the biggest trophies – that's the Champions League, the Euros, the World Cup. You need to be doing the spectacular. Maybe if you win the Champions League and have a really good season, you can start to talk about stuff like that. But it's such a long process."

Some doubted that Sterling would ever reach a stage where he was regarded as one of the world's greatest footballers. He can't predict whether he'll progress far enough to win the Ballon d'Or, but he was always adamant he'd reach the level he's at now.

OH BROTHER!

The City kits Raheem's wearing came from very different eras for the club...

1989

The top of the table had a fairly familiar ring to it in May 1989. Chelsea were the champions and Manchester City the runners-up – but this wasn't the top tier. Down in the Second Division, boss Mel Machin had a squad packed with bright young things that helped City to win automatic promotion back into the First Division. Among them was the highly rated Paul Lake (right), whose career was sadly blighted by several knee injuries, as well as defender Andy Hinchcliffe, midfielder Michael Hughes and forward David White.



1999

Few fans will forget May 30, 1999 – the start of the club's revival. Third place in the third tier that season represented City's worst ever league finish but it produced one of their best ever moments, in the play-off final at Wembley. Wearing this kit, they trailed 2-0 to Gillingham after 89 minutes, but levelled in the 96th minute through Paul Dickov (right) before winning the penalty shootout. "If we hadn't got out of that division immediately, I'm not sure there would have been a next year," manager Joe Royle later told *FFT*.



Images PA Images/Getty Images

"I HAD TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME AFTER A DISAPPOINTING FEW YEARS WITH ENGLAND"

"From a young age, no matter what you tell me, I'll do the opposite," he states, speaking with emphasis on each word now. "If you tell me that I can't do something, I'll do it. In my career, no matter how hard times have been, no matter how badly I've been playing, there's never been one shift in my mind about where I'm going. I know it's simply a matter of time before I'm playing the way I know I can play and getting to the level I know I can get to.

"That's not to sound confident, that's not to sound arrogant, but that's how I've been from a young age. Things are going to get tough. Football is not easy. There are a lot of things that go on apart from just playing on the field. But there was never one moment during the bad times I was going through that I didn't think, 'I will be at this stage'. I always had the belief that I would be."

"IF WE'RE IN THE FINAL, IN MY HOME CITY, AT WEMBLEY, IT'S GOING DOWN!"

Sterling's progress has been such that some have even tipped him to reach Lionel Messi's level one day. "Where do you put Raheem with the likes of Messi and Ronaldo?" pundit Trevor Sinclair asked recently. "I would put him right amongst them. He's there now."

The man himself is a little more circumspect. "Messi's one a kind!" he says, smiling. "Bro, if I'm scoring 50 or 60 goals a year for the next 15 years, then you can talk to me about that – right now, don't talk to me about Ronaldo or Messi! I don't want to hear that connection.

"I'm not saying that I don't value myself, but those are two guys who have been doing it for 15 years. That's not heard of: 40, 50, 60 goals for 15 years. There's a long process to go for that. But I'm developing, and I want to get my numbers better every single year. If I'm doing that in 10 or 15 years' time, then OK, maybe. But it's early days."

Given Sterling's form over the past couple of seasons, it has been of little surprise that he's been linked with a move to Barcelona or Real Madrid in the future. He is extremely keen to make clear that he has absolutely no plans to move any time soon, but he is open to the idea of playing abroad at some point between now and the end of his career.

"I know what I want to do in football, and I know what I want to achieve," he tells *FFT*. "I just need to continue to work hard at this amazing facility we've got here at City. If you have a facility like this, how can you not go on to do good things? Use the facilities to the maximum and try to win as many trophies as you can – that's definitely my motto for the season. Everyone wants to be loved, and I'm at a club where people chant my name every weekend. There's no nicer feeling."

Is there a particular club he would love to play for one day in the distant future, when he has won everything he wants to win with City? "No comment!" he laughs. "I'm happy where I am at this moment, and I don't see a need for a change. For sure, there's a moment in my career that I'd love to be abroad, in some sun somewhere."

Before then, Sterling has dreams of England glory, too. He had an initial insight into what that might be like when the country won the Cricket World Cup final in July. "I saw some of the highlights," he explains. "To see how well the team did and how they were spoken about, it was a great feeling not just for them but for me, too. To see an English team win a World Cup was amazing."

Ahead of Qatar 2022, the Three Lions have the chance to succeed on home soil at next year's European Championship. The semi-finals and the final will be held at Wembley, barely a quarter of a mile from where Sterling went to school as a youngster. Does he ever allow himself to dream of becoming a national hero for the rest of his life?

"Oh mate, don't get me started..." he says with a grin. "In my home city, at Wembley? Don't get me started. If I'm on that pitch and we're at Wembley in the final, just know that it's going down!

"No, I'm joking. But we finished fourth at the last World Cup and we've got even better as an attacking team since then. We just need to go with belief. On our day, we can beat anyone."


Image PA Images

Above Virgil van Dijk won the international showdown, but it was Sterling who won the Premier League title

If Sterling can guide his country to a trophy, allied with his increasingly influential role as an anti-racism campaigner off the field, then maybe even Sir Raheem Sterling isn't entirely out of the question one day?

"Sir Raheem Sterling don't sound too bad..." he says, smiling. "I'd use that title when I go home. I'd say to the missus, 'What's my name? You have to say Sir Raheem Sterling!' But no, I'm joking again. That's not something I think about. That comes naturally if you have been doing good things for a long time."

There's a long way to go before something like that might happen, but the fact that there is even the tiniest possibility says much for the resilience of a player who once called himself 'The Hated One'.

Right now, however, he is 'The Hungry One'. It's nearly 7pm and Sterling is understandably ready to go home, having had a late afternoon training session today.

"Bro, I want my Jamaican dinner tonight – I'm starving!" he tells us with a laugh. "I've been trying to think and get all my words out, but I'm so hungry!"

He kindly signs the two retro shirts from the photo shoot, then shakes our hand not once but twice before departing, still chatting with us about our travel plans.

In our time with him, we feel as if we have seen Sterling's last few years in microcosm – gradually finding his confidence, gradually finding his voice, to the point where he wasn't afraid to express himself any more.

We can't pretend to know him completely based on a couple of interviews, but maybe this always was the real Raheem Sterling. Maybe all that was required was a genuine attempt to understand him. Maybe he was a good guy all along.

OUT GOES SILVA IN COMES GOLD

When Pep Guardiola said he wouldn't need to replace the departing David Silva with a megabucks arrival in the summer of 2020, he meant it. Phil Foden's time has finally come to take the baton for Manchester City – and the local hero says he's raring to go

Words Chris Flanagan



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
SEPTEMBER 2020

"I WAS BEHIND THE NET WHEN AGÜERO SCORED – IT'S MAD TO THINK I PLAY WITH HIM NOW"

For one brief moment as he speaks to *FourFourTwo*, Phil Foden is 11 years old again.

He's thinking back to the day when he witnessed history right in front of his very eyes at the Etihad Stadium. The day in 2012 when a young fan's dream came true. The day Manchester City became champions of England for the first time in nearly half a century, in the most dramatic fashion.

"I was directly behind the net when Sergio Agüero scored," he says with a smile. "Then we celebrated on the pitch – I was on there at the end, with however many other people that afternoon. That was my main highlight as a City fan – it's mad to think I play with those players now."

Since making his first-team debut in 2017, Foden has spent almost three years learning from some heroes of that title-winning team. Agüero remains, but Yaya Toure and Vincent Kompany have since moved on – and now David Silva, too: City's player of the season in that pivotal 2011-12 campaign.

The Spaniard was Foden's idol, and still is. At just 20 years of age, he has been handed the torch and entrusted to follow in Silva's midfield footsteps. "When David said it was his last year, I told the board that we have Phil, so we don't have to invest," coach Pep Guardiola explained recently. "In the next 15 years, Phil will be an outstanding player for us. I don't have doubts."

Eight years ago, Foden cheered City's title challenge from the stands. Now, he's been given the chance to live the biggest dream of all – to play a pivotal role himself, as the Sky Blues try to wrestle back the Premier League from Liverpool in 2020-21. Do that, and he could become a crucial figure for England at the rescheduled Euros next summer.



Below A world champion at 16

The last three years have already proved pretty special for Phil Foden. What lies ahead could be the biggest season of his life.

ONCE A BLUE...

Such is the diminutive midfielder's talent and technical ability, he had gained the nickname of 'Stockport Iniesta' even before making his first-team debut.

"Edgeley is a small part of Stockport, close to Stockport County's stadium," says Foden, one of six siblings. "I'm from a big family – I played football with my older brother a lot, but not many of them enjoyed the game as much as me. They liked to watch it, but I was fully committed, always playing out on the streets with my mates. I think that brought me on as a player, because I always played against people who were bigger and more physical than me. My family could tell from when I was very young that I really wanted to become a footballer." ▸

Images Getty Images



A teacher at Bridge Hall Primary School had noticed his skills in the playground, and that quickly led to his big break. "I was at primary school and I heard there was a City coach coming in to train the year six kids," he says. "I was several years below them, but they didn't see any potential in that age group so they asked, 'Have you got any other players that might interest us?' Our PE teacher told them about me, and the coach brought me to train on my own outside. He said he liked me, gave me his card to give to my parents and asked them to give him a call. Ever since that day, I've been at City."

Foden joined the club's under-9s setup, to the delight of his family – even though his father actually supported Manchester United. "Obviously going to train with City made me a fan straight away," he says. "I told my dad that I wanted to be a City fan and he replied, 'OK', but I could see in his face that he was a bit disappointed. I think he saw it coming, though, once I was training with them.

"He was happy that I'd gone to a club, and especially one as good as City. He's the main reason I got into football. He had football on the TV when I was growing up, then he took me to training every day. Without his desire for wanting me to play the game, I probably wouldn't be where I am now. I see some kids who probably could have been really good, but their mums and dads didn't take them to training – so they couldn't get as far as they would have done."

His father remained a United fan, although Foden has been working on that ever since. "When derby days came around, it was me and my mum supporting City, then my dad and my brother supporting United – arguing and debating about who was going to win," he laughs. "But since I've been in City's first team and it's been me against United, I think I'm turning him slowly into a City fan – he's not as interested in United as he used to be!"

Still only 5ft 7in tall now, Foden needed to overcome a size disadvantage to make his way through the Manchester City academy. That he never felt hindered by his stature perhaps says a lot about the modernisation of English academies, and the increasing emphasis on technique over physicality. "I was always the smallest in the team, and also the smallest in games at the weekend, but I really didn't think about it at the time," he says. "The manager told me, 'You use your brain well enough anyway. You don't need your size and don't need to do anything differently – just carry on playing your football'. They looked after me. When you're young, they only want you to enjoy your football. Then when I was around 14 or 15, I started to focus on getting into the first team."

PEP AND THE SWEET SIXTEEN

Weeks after Foden's 16th birthday, Guardiola began work as the new boss of Manchester City. Director of football Txiki Begiristain made him aware of a burgeoning talent in the club's academy, and Foden was promptly invited to join the first team at training.





"I'd only just landed here and Txiki told me, 'You have to meet one player, 15 or 16 years old'," Guardiola later explained. "In the first season, he came to training sessions for one day, two days, and I said, 'Wow, you're right, Txiki – this player is good'."

So impressed was the former Barcelona and Bayern Munich coach that he named Foden on the bench for a Champions League group game against Celtic that December.

"When Guardiola was appointed, obviously I'd seen him on TV, but I didn't really know how he was – so when I went to train with the first team, I didn't know what to expect," Foden tells *FFT*. "From the first day, I was surprised at how passionate he was, and how motivated he was towards his players. I wanted to develop under him and become his player, because I believed in everything he said.

"I was shocked on that first day I got a call-up against Celtic, because I didn't train with the first team that time – I just got a call saying, 'You're going to be on the bench for the first time'. It was a big day for my family."

Foden didn't feature in the 1-1 draw against the Glasgow giants – an unused substitute alongside Agüero, the striker he had roared on from the stands against QPR a mere four years earlier. But his first-team bow was only a matter of when rather than if.

As he got more opportunities to train with the senior side, he relished the chance to link up with Silva, a boyhood inspiration. "I always liked David Silva – I thought he was a great player every time I watched him play," says Foden. "I admired Jack Wilshere as well when I was growing up. I remember that Arsenal goal he scored [against Norwich] when he did loads of one-twos – everyone in my area used to go mad about his goal and how good it was. I just liked those kinds of players who kept on the ball in really tight areas, not the biggest players. I like to think I was the same as them as a kid.

"The first time I met David, I just realised how humble he was; dead polite and quiet; everything that you imagined. He has a huge knowledge for the game and can definitely be a coach in the future. That's how he is on the pitch as well – he sees things before they happen and knows the spaces to move into."

Foden continued to watch and learn. In the summer of 2017, Guardiola gave the young midfielder a starting spot for a pre-season game against Manchester United in Houston. "I think it was the most important moment of my career," says the starlet. "Everything seemed to go right for me in that friendly – even though we lost 2-0, I played really well. I'd been waiting for that day as a lad growing up, especially for it to be against United. It was crazy. I think that game pushed Pep to put me with the first team."

Early that season, Foden headed for India to represent England at the Under-17 World Cup, buoyed by the faith that Guardiola was showing in him. In front of nearly 67,000 fans in Kolkata, he scored twice as England came from 2-0 down to beat Spain 5-2 in the final.

Images Getty Images

Foden was named player of the tournament for his performances – an honour bestowed on Toni Kroos and Cesc Fabregas at previous Under-17 World Cups.

"To win that as well as the World Cup was one of the best days of my life," he tells *FFT*. "That tournament brought me on, just for the experience of playing in a huge game, which helps you when you're playing in a cup final for City. It was good to get used to that sort of pressure in a big tournament – particularly with how many people turned up to watch the final, which was crazy for us because we were so young. It was a very special moment, and I wish I could go back and do it again."

His role in that tournament triumph thrust Foden firmly into the public eye. Immediately, he was talked about as one of the brightest talents in English football – not only now, but potentially in a generation. As he moved into first-team football, the virtuoso suddenly had some expectations to live up to – not least that Stockport Iniesta tag.

"It was good to hear, but it's a big name to live up to," he says. "These days social media can put a lot of pressure on young kids and hype them up too much, so I tried to not read too much into all of that. I tried to just enjoy my football and not change the player I am – always wanting the ball, being lively, trying to impress on the pitch."

As the youngster progressed with both club and country, he started to get noticed more, too. He can remember the first time he was asked for an autograph by a Manchester City fan. "I was just out one time and someone shouted in the street, 'Can you sign this?'" he chuckles. "It was strange, because I was like them growing up. I still think it's insane now that people ask for photographs and get me to sign things – but I've always got time to do that. I feel like people are scared to ask some players, because they're worried that they'll say no. But knowing who I am, people always feel welcome to ask me."

CATFISH AND THE TROPHY MEN

Just three weeks after his World Cup success in India, in November 2017, Foden made his competitive Manchester City debut in a 1-0 Champions League victory against Feyenoord. A fortnight after that, he made Guardiola's starting line-up at Shakhtar Donetsk – at 17 years and 192 days, becoming the youngest English player to start a Champions League fixture, and the first 2000-born player to start a match in the competition. Foden was soon named BBC Young Sports Personality of the Year – an award previously won by Wayne Rooney, Theo Walcott, Andy Murray, Jenson Button and Tom Daley.

Foden made five substitute appearances in the league that campaign, becoming the youngest player to receive a Premier League winners' medal. On the day that City sealed the title, he opted to go night fishing – politely declining captain Kompany's offer to join the players at the pub, after closest challengers United suffered a surprise 1-0 loss at home to struggling West Bromwich Albion.

"Yeah, that's a funny story actually," smiles Foden. "The lads all went out celebrating, but because of my young age, I went fishing with my dad instead of attending the party. I felt like I wasn't really involved in winning that title – even though I played enough, I didn't feel like I deserved to celebrate with them."

"SILVA IS HUMBLE, HAS A HUGE KNOWLEDGE OF THE GAME AND CAN DEFINITELY BE A MANAGER"

Clockwise from top left Foden starred in Houston; Norwich had no answers to Foden in July 2020; Pep: an admirer since day one; having got a taste at home to Celtic

Fishing, however, has long been a passion for Foden. "I still go with my dad now," he says. "When we're there, I just like to forget about football and relax."

He's been pictured on social media with his catches, including a monster 8ft fish during an expedition to the Zaragoza region. "That was over 100lbs, a catfish – it took three of us to hold it because they're massive things," adds Foden. "We go to Spain for that – the River Ebro goes on for ages, so you can really go anywhere and catch them. We went to a little town called Caspe."

Foden became a Premier League champion again in 2018-19 – making 13 appearances and heading home the only goal in a crucial April win over Spurs. In all competitions, he netted seven times in 26 games, becoming the youngest Englishman ever to score in the Champions League knockout stages when contributing to City's 7-0 stuffing of Schalke.

But there was increasing talk in the media that Foden's talent deserved more than the ▸



three Premier League starts he'd been given that season – especially when Jadon Sancho, only two months older, was starting regularly at Borussia Dortmund after opting to leave City. Both Sancho and Chelsea starlet Callum Hudson-Odoi – Foden's team-mates at the Under-17 World Cup – had gone on to make their senior England debuts.

Foden says he was surprised by the criticism that Manchester City received for not offering him more game time, however, and insists a loan move was never discussed – despite newspaper links with temporary switches to Leeds, Rangers and the Bundesliga.

"No, that was never an option," he stresses. "I always wanted to stay and Pep wanted me to stay, so that was never discussed. It didn't need to happen.

"Hearing some of the things that were said, it was crazy because I was still so young and people were saying, 'He needs to be playing more'. But if you look at the team and players we had, it was obviously very difficult to play. I'd have to perform better than them, and at such a young age, trying to play better than these professionals who've done it for many years, it's tough.

"I knew myself that I had a lot to learn and improve before I could push on for a starting place. I wasn't too disappointed in myself – I was still training the best I could every day, simply hoping for more to come. Training well made me feel better about myself, because I couldn't be doing any more than I was. If I didn't try my best, I would have beat myself up about it – but I could say, 'No problem if I'm not in the team, I've done all that I can'."

He was left in no doubt that Guardiola still firmly believed in him, when the pair sat next to each other at a press conference before City's friendly with Yokohama F Marinos last summer. "Phil is the most talented player I've ever seen in my career as a football player and manager," declared Guardiola. This from a man who managed Lionel Messi.

"Because of the players he's worked with, for him to say that, especially in front of me, it made me think, 'Wow... I hope he's telling the truth!'" says Foden, bursting into laughter. "It makes you feel wanted when a manager speaks that highly of you."

The midfielder feels his game has improved massively thanks to working with the Catalan.



Above
Replacing the iconic Silva won't be simple

"Sometimes it's hard to explain, but it's the small details," he continues. "It's literally just one yard difference, in possession and where he wants you to move into space – the little things that some managers and some people miss. Those tiny details make a big difference. If we're struggling in a match, he'll change something straight away. He'll get a message on, and the game will immediately change. But he never really seems to get his tactics wrong, and if he does he holds his hands up. Everyone makes mistakes, but it's very rare that Pep does."

SILVA LININGS PLAYBOOK

Foden has matured for another reason, too – becoming a father at the age of 18, after his childhood sweetheart Rebecca Cooke gave birth to baby Ronnie in 2019. "He's one now and is getting to that funny age where he's started picking up on certain things," smiles Foden. "You have to be fully aware and have eyes in the back of your head.

"Having a kid at such a young age, people don't think it's going to be easy – and I had to grow up very fast and be mature about it.

WHY CITY FANS LOVE PHIL

Steven McInerney, from the Esteemed Kompany YouTube channel, explains what Sky Blues supporters admire about the midfielder

1 HE'S ONE OF OUR OWN

City fans have had it good in recent years. Quality players, amazing football, trophies – but one thing we haven't enjoyed in this period has been someone to call our own from the academy. For all the excitement of signing a superstar, there's nothing like watching someone live your own dream. He's a blue, a local lad, and means it when he kisses the badge. It's thrilling seeing a kid emerge who could become a club legend.

2 HIS LACK OF FEAR

Given everything, Foden would have every right to look a bit out of place. He's surrounded by world-class talent, managed by possibly the greatest ever in the game, playing at the highest level with monumental expectations – yet he's taken to this with an almost unnatural ease. The youngster fears nothing. He runs at people, demands the ball, brings boundless energy and makes things happen. His character is infectious.

3 HE'S A PRODUCTIVITY MACHINE

Away from his academy status and irresistible enthusiasm, Foden is simply a fantastic player. By the end of the 2019-20 Premier League campaign, he'd played 1,673 minutes in all competitions, scored eight goals and teed up a further nine for his team-mates. That's a goal contribution every 98 minutes – slightly less than one per game. The scary thought is that he only turned 20 in May and will get better and better...

But I feel comfortable. If you come home and you've not had the best of games, just to see him smiling, it makes you realise that there's much more to life."

With a happy home life complementing his immense footballing talent, Foden's time was always going to come at the Etihad Stadium. After being named the man of the match in 2020's League Cup final victory over Aston Villa, he finally started to get regular starting opportunities when English football returned from lockdown in mid-June. Unsurprisingly he flourished, netting five goals and delivering a string of star displays during the domestic run-in – not least against Liverpool, when he exchanged one-twos with İlkay Gündoğan and Kevin De Bruyne to bag City's sumptuous third in a 4-0 rout of the champions.

"I've been really happy with my form," he admits. "When you score and assist goals, it makes you happy about yourself, and makes you feel that you're playing well. After coming back from lockdown, I've been playing higher up the pitch, on the wing more, so it's allowed me to get more goals. I've been enjoying the new role so far – it's great when you can play in different positions and do well. I'm a good finisher so I'm trying to repay the manager's faith by scoring goals. I feel like my preferred position is still in midfield, but I won't mind playing out wide next season if it happens."

The likelihood is that he will return to the centre of the pitch, where a space has now opened up after the departure of Sky Blues icon Silva. It's a space that Guardiola has long since earmarked for Foden. The 20-year-old admits he was flattered once again when his manager declared the club didn't need more substantial investment to replace the man known as 'Merlin'.

"It was a big statement," explains Foden. "To spend this last year with David has been special for me and I've enjoyed it, because of the club legend that he is. But it's not as easy as just replacing a player like him. There are several who can play in that position, such as Bernardo [Silva]. Pep's always a believer that whoever trains well, he will pick. I'm going to prepare myself as best as I can to be ready – I'd love to be a key player, but it's going to be difficult because of the standard here. I'm a squad player, so I have to earn that place."

He takes the same view when it comes to England and the European Championship this summer. Foden's involvement seemed unlikely if the tournament had gone ahead as planned last year, but a 12-month delay could give him a chance of not just making the squad, but even the starting line-up.

Boosted by recent form, he feels ready for his senior England debut if the opportunity arises soon. "I've been performing well in the best league in the world, and I feel ready," he insists. "I've been playing well and I couldn't have done myself any harm – I've definitely given myself the best opportunity. It would be another dream come true if I played for England – it's something I want to do every day of my life."

But as with the talk of being Silva's direct successor, Foden is keen to downplay media claims that he could be the missing piece in Gareth Southgate's jigsaw – the attacking midfield link to the Three Lions' ace forward line, and the player who can help dominate possession in the centre of the pitch. It was a tag previously bestowed on Wilshere with mixed results.

"There are a lot of special talents coming through, so I'm hoping all of them can be the missing pieces and we can come together as a team," states Foden. "When they get into a big game, England have been missing that experience to keep the ball and see games out, so I hope that with kids coming through, the young team we have can adapt quickly and get over the line."

Either way, a major role in a title-winning Manchester City team would certainly help his chances of featuring at a Euros on home soil. Guardiola's men are aiming to overhaul Liverpool in 2020-21, after falling a surprising 18 points short last term.

"We can't lose it by as many points as we did last season," says Foden. "It's not easy to keep winning the Premier League every year. It's the hardest thing to do, so we're not too down on ourselves – we still finished second. But we're going to give it everything we've got to come back stronger."

Should Manchester City emerge victorious this season, there may be no need for Foden to invade the pitch at full-time, like he did in 2012. This time, he hopes he will already be there taking centre stage. The youngster will never forget that moment as an 11-year-old, when Agüero scored his famous 94th-minute goal against QPR. If he can play his own key role in Premier League glory, the feeling will be even sweeter.



Images Getty Images

GUARDIOLA: "HE'S THE MOST TALENTED PLAYER I'VE EVER SEEN IN MY ENTIRE CAREER"

Above Foden is getting used to lifting silverware

Images Getty Images



PA Images/Alamy/Dave Thompson

11 GREATEST MAN CITY MOMENTS

Since 1894, Manchester City have scaled great heights and experienced some magical moments in between plumbing the depths. It has been anything but boring

Words Stephen Tudor & Charles Ginger **Photos** Getty Images

Manchester City's storied past sometimes reads like a far-fetched soap opera. This is a club that won the First Division in 1937 only to be relegated the following season despite scoring more goals than anyone else. They remain the only top-flight side to drop with a positive goal difference.

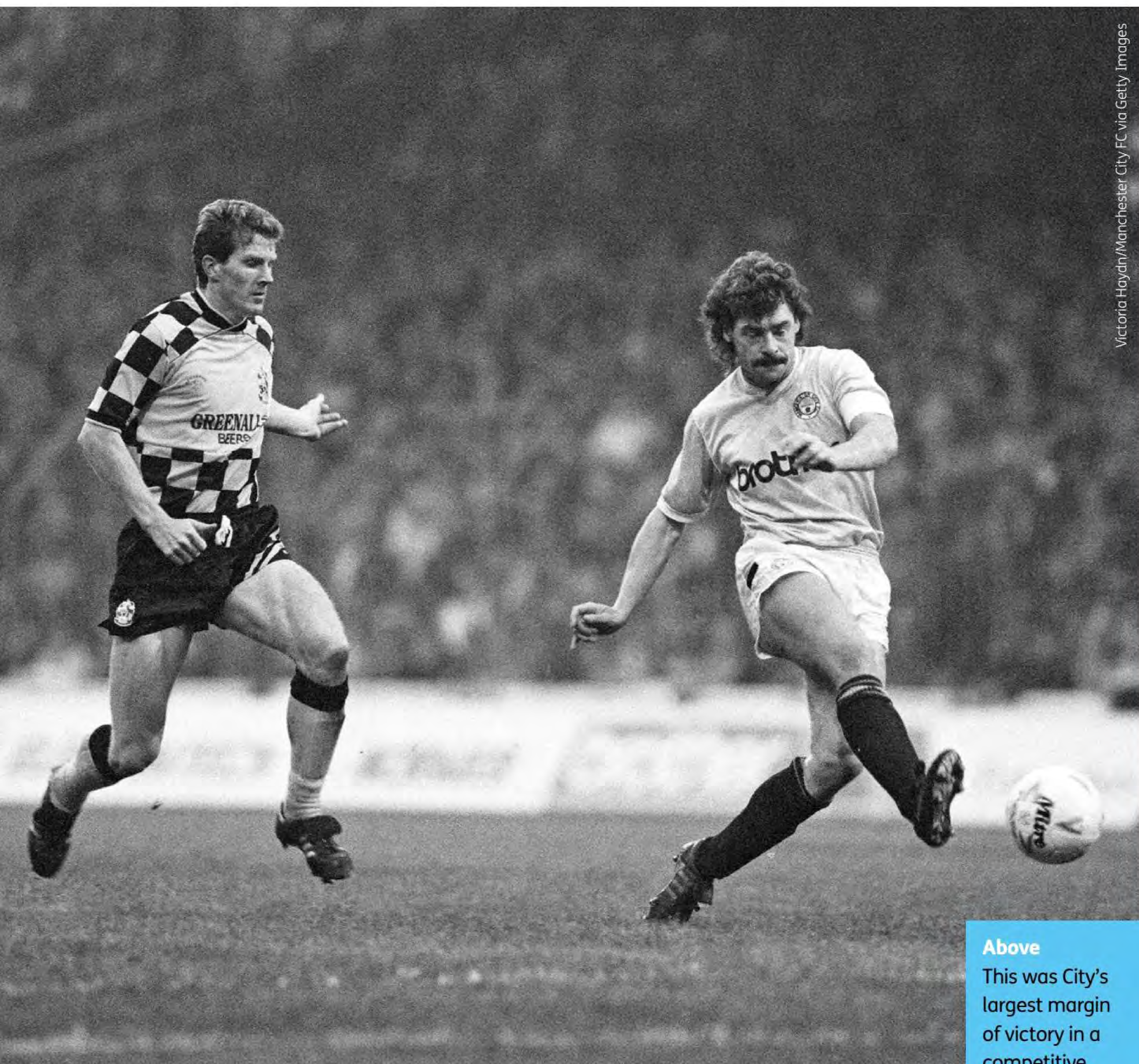
This is a club that helped keep Manchester United in existence following World War II but then suffered the indignity of being over-shadowed by their neighbours for generations.

This is a club that yo-yoed through the leagues in the 1980s and '90s, burning their way through ten different managers in nine years when things really hit the skids, until they were utterly transformed by a takeover that brought unimaginable riches and totaly dominance on the pitch.

"THEY YO-YOED THROUGH THE LEAGUES IN THE 1980S AND '90S"

Not for nothing has 'Typical City' entered football's lexicon in our lifetime, a phrase used to celebrate a mercurial outfit incapable of being dull, who are just as likely to shoot themselves in the foot as pull off a miracle. Such wild extremes have naturally offered up plenty of moments, from unforgettable highs to crushing despair, snatched from the very jaws of victory. Here, though, it is only the former we are interested in.

Since their birth in 1894, Manchester City have made a habit of breaking records and grabbing the headlines, from winning the league in the most incredible manner possible to equalling their neighbour's treble of 1999. Long may their soap opera continue.



Victoria Haydn/Manchester City FC via Getty Images

Above
This was City's largest margin of victory in a competitive fixture

PUTTING TEN PAST THE TERRIERS

7 November 1987

11 History can strike in the unlikeliest of places, such as Maine Road on a chilly November afternoon in 1987, when City secured their largest ever margin of victory in a competitive fixture.

The visitors that day were Huddersfield Town, who were rooted to the bottom of Division Two and looked fated to drop even at this early juncture of the season. City, for their part, were mid-table and mid-transition, with new manager Mel Machin recruiting a handful of unfamiliar names plucked from the lower leagues.

Surprisingly, it was the Terriers who started the brightest, but 12 minutes in Neil McNab put the Blues ahead, and when Paul Stewart doubled City's advantage after half an hour the floodgates opened.

A sparse 19,583 attendance was treated to the almost unique sight of a side reaching double figures that day, and even more incredibly there were three different hat-trick heroes, as Stewart, David White and Tony Adcock all went home clutching a well-earned match ball.

Late on and nine goals down Huddersfield were awarded a penalty, with folklore having it that the culpable defender fouled on purpose because he wanted to be involved in a game with ten goals. He need not have worried as White rounded the keeper with just seconds remaining to conclude a thoroughly surreal and one-sided match.

A TON OF POINTS

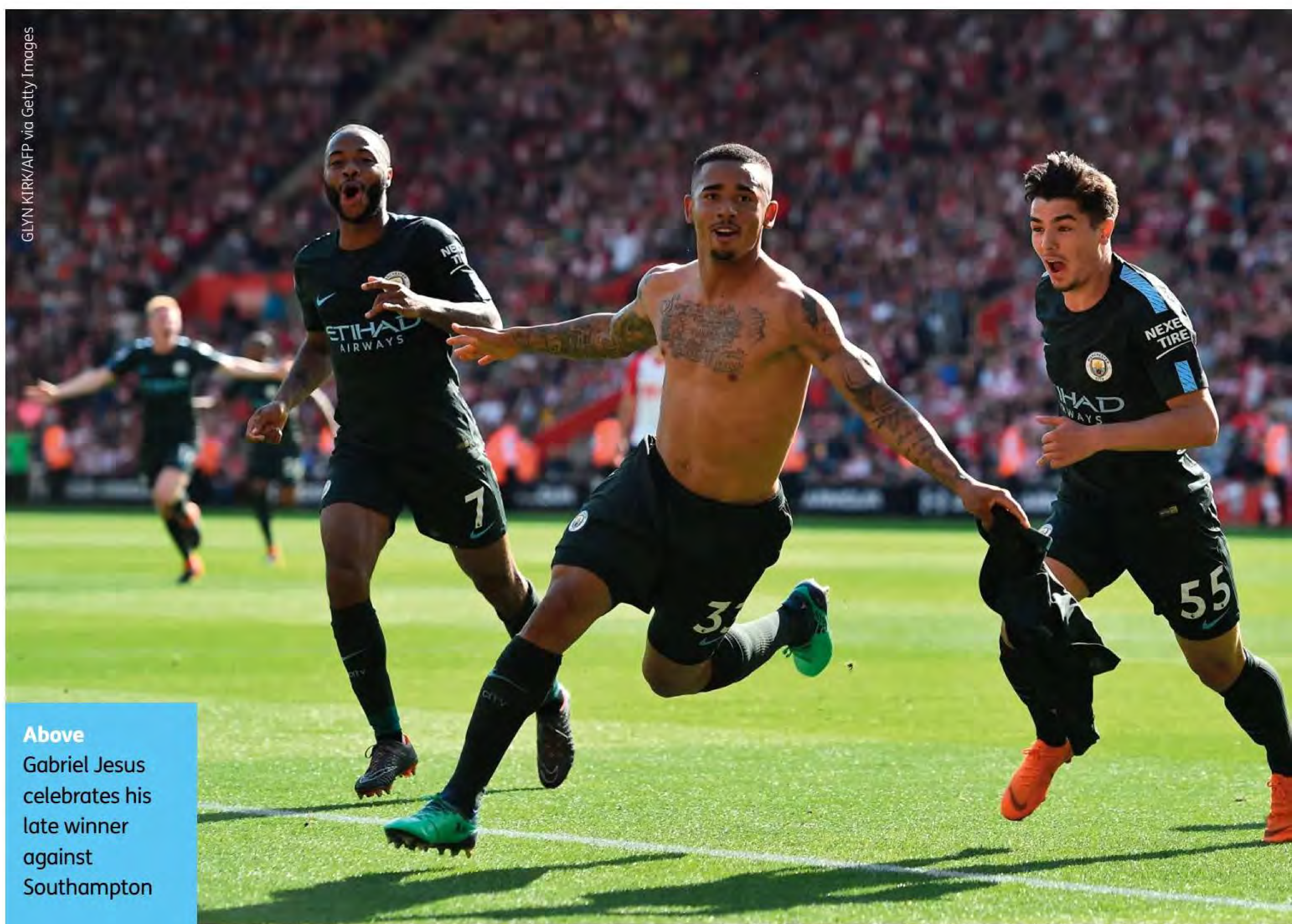
13 May 2018

10 All the great teams down the ages deserve an iconic nickname, but sadly too seldomly do they catch on. There were the fabulous 'Busby Babes' of course, while Arsenal's feat of navigating a whole season unbeaten means they will forever be known as the 'Invincibles'.

Manchester City's complete supremacy of the 2017-18 campaign, achieved via an extravagant brand of football that raised the bar for the English game, saw them smash several long-standing records along the way. But was there a 'hook' that would see them immortalised for generations to come?

There was, and it came in the form of reaching 100 points, something that had never been done before in the top flight. Just one more win on the final day of the season was needed away to Southampton and Pep's men would become the 'Centurions'.

For 90 minutes the Saints held firm and it seemed the moniker would elude the Blues. That was until Gabriel Jesus netted the winner in the dying moments, snatching the points and, more importantly, immortality.



GLYN KIRK/AFP via Getty Images

Above
Gabriel Jesus celebrates his late winner against Southampton

MANCHESTER IS BLUE

16 April 2011

09 City's rise to prominence in the modern era contains many pivotal landmarks, and when looking back on their initial successes post-takeover, it is logical that their FA Cup final victory over Stoke City in 2011 stands out. After all, it was their first trophy for 35 years. They were finally off and running again.

Yet any Blue worth their salt will always hold the semi-final win over arch-rivals Manchester United in greater affection, a game won by a single goal courtesy of a Yaya Touré strike.

Having lived in the shadow of their neighbours for an awfully long time this was a result as symbolic as it was significant, indicating that a transference of power was underway both in Manchester and at the summit of the English game. It was a triumph that came with an announcement and, furthermore, dispensed with an inferiority complex that had built up over several decades.

City would go on to thrash their nearest-and-not-so-dearest 6-1 at Old Trafford just six months later, securing them their top-dog status in the city. It was a status first seized at Wembley.



Sharon Latham/Manchester City FC via Getty Images

Above
Mario Balotelli gets away from United defender Rio Ferdinand

TERRIFYING EUROPE

29 April 1970

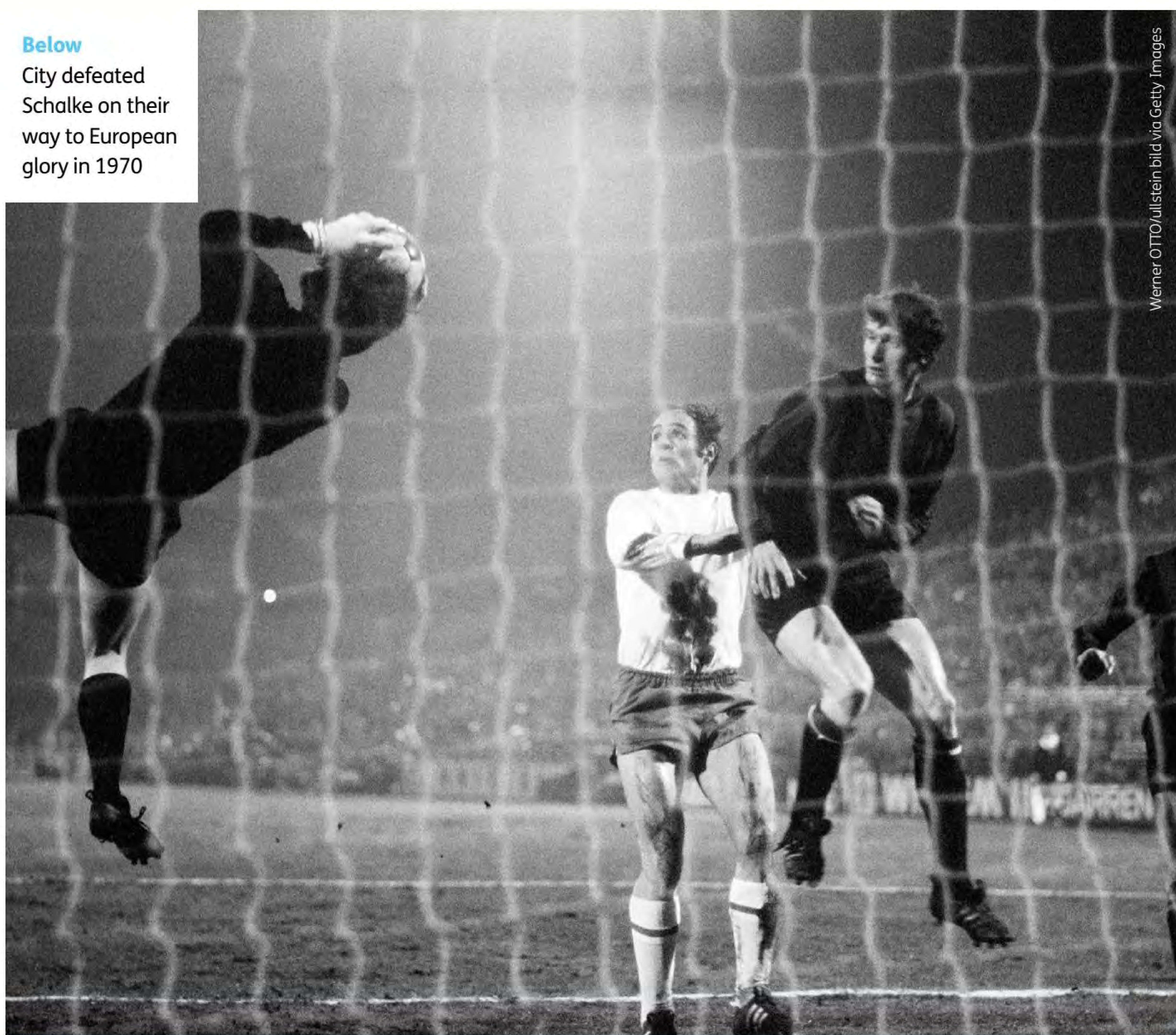
08 A solid rebuttal to anyone who belittles Manchester City's supposed lack of history is that the Blues lifted a European trophy long before Liverpool or Juventus, two giants on the continental stage.

Their triumph took place in 1970 amid atrocious conditions in Vienna as a vintage City team containing Francis Lee and Colin Bell swept aside Polish outfit Górnik Zabrze, the 2-1 score-line not a true reflection of their superiority on the night.

Winning the FA Cup a year earlier gained the Blues entry into the European Cup Winners' Cup, and with Athletic Bilbao and Schalke bested on route, City headed to a rain-sodden Prater Stadium to fulfil an earlier prophesy of their flamboyant coach Malcolm Allison that his team would one day 'terrify the cowards of Europe'.

Sadly, a fixture clash with the FA Cup final replay between Chelsea and Leeds meant that all too few people watched their triumph on the continent, with only the highlights shown almost as an afterthought by the BBC.

Below
City defeated Schalke on their way to European glory in 1970



Werner OTTO/ullstein bild via Getty Images

TUEART'S ACROBATIC CUP WINNER

28 February 1976

07 Manchester City's post-war history is often oversimplified. Emphasis is rightly given to the fabulous title-winning team of the late 1960s, spearheaded by the famed attacking triumvirate of Bell, Lee and Summerbee. Then, typically the next two decades are somewhat overlooked to reach a drawn-out period of turmoil, all the better to contrast with the post-takeover success that followed.

This is a shame, because in the mid '70s the Blues came desperately close to winning the league again with a side packed with terrific talent. At the back Dave Watson and skipper Mike Doyle were all teak and guile. Down the wing Peter Barnes flew. In the dug-out, club legend Tony Book continued the philosophies laid down by Joe Mercer from City's heyday.

If a First Division crown eluded them by a single point in 1977, thankfully a domestic cup was won 12 months earlier to ensure this side's deserved place in football's annals. In front of a capacity crowd in the League Cup final, City beat Newcastle United 2-1, and better yet, the winning goal was one of the most iconic and acrobatic ever witnessed at Wembley.

With the game level at one apiece, a floated cross was headed back across the box and Dennis Tueart executed an audacious overhead kick that found the corner of the net. It was the high point of a team that nearly achieved greatness.

Kent Gavin/Mirrorpix via Getty Images



Right Dennis Tueart scores the winning goal for City with a spectacular overhead kick

Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy



Right Tueart (having swapped shirts with a Newcastle player) and Dave Watson lift the 1976 League Cup

TITLE WIN AT NEWCASTLE

11 May 1968

06 The vintage Manchester City side of the late 1960s will forever be cherished by anyone fortunate enough to have witnessed their exciting, attacking verve. Indeed, so wonderful were they to watch, their substantial achievements almost pale by way of comparison.

Beyond Manchester, however, and especially with the passing of time, it is silverware that determines any team's legacy, and in the late spring of 1968 Joe Mercer's men – coached by the innovative and exuberant Malcolm Allison – beat Newcastle away on the final day of the season to secure the first of four major trophies across a successful era.

It was a victory that pipped Manchester United to the title, which makes it a foreshadowing of the astonishing events 44 years later, but while their overcoming of QPR in 2012 required a dramatic finale this was a seven-goal classic.

Goals by Mike Summerbee, Francis Lee and a brace from forward Neil Young edged the Blues past a resilient Newcastle who grabbed a third late on to make the closing minutes tense. City were admired far and wide. Now they were champions.

"IT WAS THE FIRST OF FOUR MAJOR TROPHIES"



Right City were crowned First Division champions following victory over Newcastle United

Manchester Evening News/Mirrorpix via Getty Images

"IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE CITY NOTICED HIS ABILITY BETWEEN THE STICKS"



Right
After helping Manchester City win the cup 3-1, Bert Trautmann, injured during the match, is helped off the field rubbing his 'sore' neck. It later transpired he had broken it



Above
Bert Trautmann dives at the feet of Birmingham's Murphy during the match. It was while making this save that Trautmann unknowingly broke his neck

TRAUTMANN BREAKS NECK IN FINAL

5 May 1956

05 In the 1956 FA Cup final, watched by a 100,000-strong crowd that included the Queen, goalkeeper Bert Trautmann threw himself at the feet of Birmingham striker Peter Murphy, breaking several vertebrae in his neck.

That he carried on playing for the remaining 17 minutes is a testament to the German's estimable courage, especially as it was later revealed that a further knock could have been fatal. Yet, even had this event not been broadcast around the world, Trautmann would still be a highly significant figure in English football.

Having joined the Luftwaffe early into World War II, he won an Iron Cross for fighting on the Eastern Front before he was captured by British troops, seeing out the rest of the conflict in a POW camp. On his release, Trautmann stayed in the North West, and it wasn't long before Manchester City noticed his exceptional ability between the sticks. 20,000 people protested his signing in 1949, although they weren't moaning for long.

When he hung up his gloves 15 years later he was widely revered. Few individuals did more to heal Anglo-German relations than this remarkable man.

THE TAKEOVER

1 September 2008

04 The announcement of Manchester City's takeover came out of the blue. There were no whispers beforehand. No journalists were briefed. One minute, they were a mid-table side, presided over by a former Thai Prime Minister who had £1 billion of assets frozen in his homeland after jumping bail. The next, a consortium named the Abu Dhabi United Group had purchased City for £200m, at a stroke making them the wealthiest football club on the planet.

Within 24 hours, the Brazilian superstar Robinho had been signed and in between these seismic events City supporters pushed the boundaries of political correctness by parading outside the stadium for news cameras wearing tea-towels on their heads.

Amid all this chaos a national radio station tried to contextualise City's new-found riches, asking a Middle East expert what calibre of player they might now afford. "You have to try and forget about the concept of money," was his patient response.

In the years since, City have spent over £1.4 billion on transfers, with ADUG also investing heavily in formerly deprived areas that surround the Etihad. In 2014 a new training complex opened, considered by many to be unparalleled across sport.

The landscape of domestic football irrevocably changed back in September 2008. For City and its devoted fanbase, it was a lottery win that has made fanciful dreams a reality.

Ed Garvey/Manchester City FC via Getty Images



Below Brazilian superstar Robinho was signed just 24 hours after the Abu Dhabi takeover

A PLAY-OFF MIRACLE

30 May 1999

03 It may be questioned why a play-off victory over lowly Gillingham tops a takeover that furnished City with untold riches and an abundance of silverware. Simply put, without their miraculous comeback at Wembley as a new millennium dawned, there would be no 'Agüeroooo' moment, and certainly no ascendancy into the elite of English football. Perhaps there would only be struggle and misery persisting right up to the present. This then was a real sliding doors moment for the Blues, who in 1999 were barely recognisable to the behemoth we know today. Years of chronic mismanagement and catastrophic failure had brought this fine club to its knees, relegating them into the third tier for the first time in their history, and with a bloated squad on unsustainable wages, financially they were on the brink. It is all too easy to imagine what fate awaited them had they stayed there for too long. At best, obscurity. At worst, oblivion.

It was therefore imperative that they bounced back at the earliest opportunity, and after a difficult opening half to their season City recovered well under the guileful watch of Joe Royle to reach a play-off final and a date with destiny. With the final whistle imminent, however, their dream had horribly unravelled courtesy of two late goals by the Gills. Surely it was over? Surely obscurity beckoned. 'Cityitis', it seemed, had struck again. Or had it?

A Kevin Horlock strike in injury time offered a ray of hope, and then, with seconds to spare, the ball broke to Paul Dickov, who thundered a late, late equaliser high into the net. City then won the following shootout against a crestfallen Gills. The Blues were back from the dead.



Below Two late goals from Gillingham left City fans fearing the worst

Alex Livesey/Allsport via Getty Images



Below An incredible comeback and penalty shootout victory saw City return to the First Division

Alex Livesey/Allsport via Getty Images

AGÜEROOOOOO!

13 May 2012

02 "I swear you'll never see anything like this ever again!" That's what Sky Sports commentator Martin Tyler shrieked in sheer disbelief seconds after Sergio Agüero's shot had reverberated around the globe. The Argentine striker was promptly mobbed by team-mates as complete bedlam ensued around the Etihad Stadium.

In almost any other situation Tyler's words might be considered an exaggeration, but here it felt like an understatement. At 3.48pm on Sunday, 13 May 2012, 93 minutes and 20 seconds into Manchester City's final game of their season, a million and more minds were blown.

City's coronation was supposed to be a relatively straightforward affair, with a win at home to QPR enough to secure their first league title for nearly half a century. After overturning a deficit of eight points to catch their arch-rivals Manchester United during the season's run-in, the Blues now controlled their destiny. Surely not even 'Typical City' could blow this?

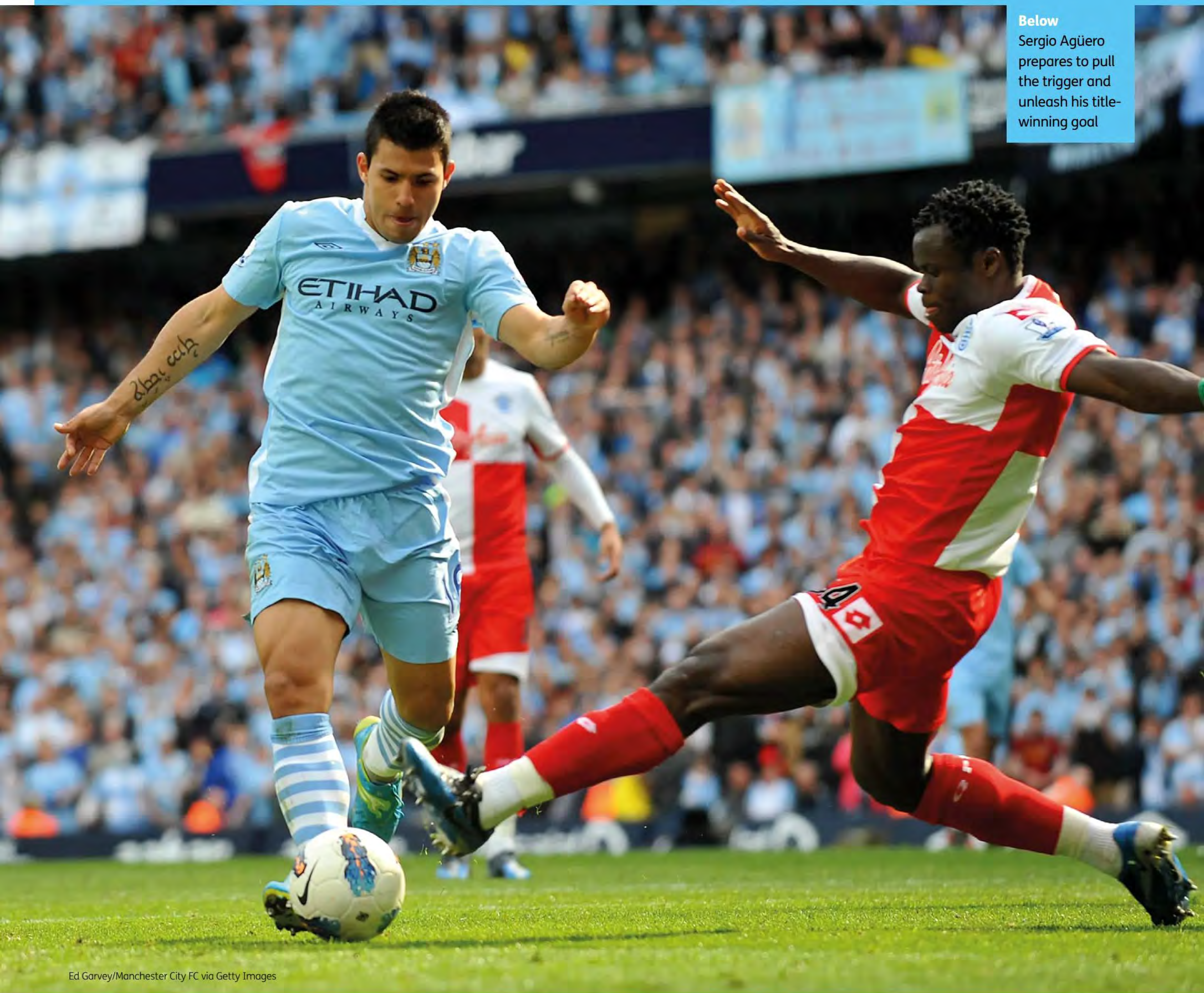
For their part, United had to win at Sunderland then hope City tripped at the final hurdle. Their victory in the North East was possibly the only predictable outcome of a thoroughly surreal afternoon.

As half-time approached in Manchester, the Reds' hopes of clinching yet another Premier League title stretched from forlorn to unthinkable as City full-back Pablo Zabaleta put his side in front. Nerves were calmed. The champagne was put on ice.

That was until a crazy period in the second half saw QPR score twice on the break while losing Joey Barton to a straight red in between.

Cue scenes that resembled the Alamo as City camped in the Hoops' half, creating and missing chance after chance as manager Roberto Mancini spectacularly lost his composure. In the stands, fingernails were bitten down to nothing. Deep into added-on time, an Eden Džeko header brought the contest level, but logic dictated it was too late for a sensational winner. Only seconds remained.

Still, the taunting clock permitted one last desperate assault. Nigel de Jong made inroads into the visitor's stubborn resistance, and as the ball reached Mario Balotelli he fell as he nudged it into space that was suddenly – seemingly from nowhere – inhabited by Agüero. City's goal-poacher supreme took a touch before firing home past Paddy Kenny for arguably the most dramatic finale ever seen in sport.



Below
Sergio Agüero prepares to pull the trigger and unleash his title-winning goal

Ed Garvey/Manchester City FC via Getty Images

Orange Pics BV/Alamy Live News

"RODRI PICKED HIS SPOT AND SLAMMED HOME THE TREBLE-WINNING GOAL"

Above
The unlikeliest of heroes: Rodri races towards the City fans inside the Atatürk Stadium after scoring against Inter

WINNING THE TREBLE

10 June 2023

01 If in those heady days following City's impossibly dramatic title win in May 2012 anyone had told the sky-blue faithful that this was only the beginning, that one day that iconic Agüero winner would be eclipsed, they would probably have been laughed out of the Etihad. How can you possibly better a 93rd-minute goal to snatch a first league title in 44 years from the hands of your bitter cross-city rivals? The answer would not come for over a decade, but when it did every City fan in the world realised in one euphoric moment that their club now had a new moment to cherish: the moment they witnessed their team make history by winning a history-making treble in the bowels of the Atatürk Stadium, scene of Liverpool's famous 2005 Champions League final fightback against AC Milan and now forever synonymous in the blue half of Manchester with ultimate glory.

After clinching a fifth league title in six seasons and then defeating United in the first all-Manchester FA Cup final, the footballing world turned its gaze on Istanbul on 10 June as Guardiola's City, desperate to exorcise the ghosts of their 2021 Champions League final defeat to Chelsea, prepared to contest Europe's showcase sporting event with Inter Milan.

Prior to the match the majority of experts had given the Italian outfit little chance against a rampant City, destroyers of Bayern and Real Madrid en route to their second final under Guardiola. However, Simone Inzaghi's charges equipped themselves superbly, bravely pressing City high up the pitch and thereby upsetting their usually smooth rhythm.

At some stage in their journey to greatness all teams must overcome that moment when the path to victory narrows and the spectre of defeat looms. On a tense night in Turkey, City proved yet again that they are such a team, rallying in the wake of Kevin De Bruyne's injury to impose themselves on a tiring Inter for long enough to score the goal that would elevate them into the pantheon of City greats.

Gliding down the right side of the Inter box with 68 minutes played, Bernardo Silva cut the ball back inside only to see it richochet off a defender. Keeping his composure while others screamed for handball, Rodri picked his spot and slammed home the treble-winning goal. "We deserve this. What a season," he beamed afterwards, basking in the light of scoring the most important goal in City's history.

MODEL CITIZEN

In the summer of 2011, Manchester City signed a forward they hoped would help the club reach new heights. He would become one of the greatest foreign players ever to grace the English game

Words Charles Ginger



Image Manchester City/Getty

As the sky-blue confetti fluttered down onto the Wembley turf and Carlos Tevez raised the FA Cup into the afternoon sky with a roar, it seemed to the watching world that the Blue Moon had finally risen, decades of disappointment exorcised by the cold press of silverware. The hunt for a trophy was over, millions spent in recruiting a squad of stars vindicated by Yaya Touré's thunderous winner. And yet the sense that this team could be so much more remained, a belief that permeated through the corridors of power at City's majestic Etihad Stadium.

Despite ending the 2010-2011 season in triumph, City had ultimately fallen nine points short of Premier League champions and bitter rivals Manchester United, been dumped out of the League Cup by West Brom in the third round, and seen their Europa League adventure ended in the last 16 by Dynamo Kiev.

In the league, City's attack had been spearheaded by future renegade Carlos Tevez, the Argentine netting 20 times. However, their next most prolific scorer was Touré with eight, a healthy return for a box-to-box midfielder, but not enough to alter City's domestic prospects. The likes of Mario Balotelli and Edin Džeko (bought for £22.5 million and £27 million respectively) had only mustered a paltry eight Premier League goals between them. With the 2011-12 season looming, City desperately required the services of a ruthless predator if the momentum of their FA Cup win was to be harnessed and unleashed upon the league. They would find the marksman they needed in the form of a diminutive Argentinian plying his trade in Spain's La Liga.





Right Agüero celebrates scoring his second goal for Atlético against Chelsea in the 2009-10 Champions League campaign **Below** City's new striker is unveiled at the Etihad

NEW KUN ON THE BLOCK

Many of the finest players ever to grace a football pitch were at some point in their lives described as being born to grace a football pitch. Very few, however, were born to literally live on one. Sergio Leonel Agüero del Castillo was. Born to teenage parents into a world of abject poverty, the boy who would become affectionately known as 'Kun' (after his favourite Japanese cartoon character) was raised in ramshackle homes in Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires. Yet from the very beginning it seems young Sergio was destined for a life in football, for wherever the family moved, they always found themselves beside a potrero – an improvised football pitch. In fact, when the Agüero del Castillos relocated to Los Eucalyptus (in central Buenos Aires), their front door was a metre away from a corner flag. Naturally, Sergio began tottering out to participate in the games being contested on his doorstep.

Blessed with speed, a potent strike and a stocky frame that made him difficult to outmuscle, Sergio quickly made an impression, routinely scoring four or five goals a game. He was soon playing up to six matches every weekend for several teams, his devoted father Leonel accompanying him on his goalscoring tours of the city's rougher neighbourhoods. His exploits drew the gaze of various professional outfits, and when it came to deciding which team to join, the family's dire financial situation ironically proved to be a benefit. With no hope of paying to become members of a club (a demand many of Argentina's domestic sides made before admitting youngsters into their youth set-ups), Sergio's parents had few options. However, there was a club that was keen to take on the promising youngster, and they didn't require a membership fee: Independiente.

Joining the club at eight years old, Sergio worked hard to rise through the ranks, and in 2003 he finally achieved his dream of playing in Argentina's Primera Division when he became the youngest player to make his debut in the top flight. Despite a challenging start to his professional career that saw him wait nearly a year for another start, Agüero



was determined to make his parents' sacrifices count (his father had enjoyed a promising football career of his own before hanging up his boots to support his son's progress). Eventually, his first goal for Independiente came, and over the course of three professional seasons another 22 would follow in just 54 appearances. Once more attracting the interest of numerous clubs, in May 2006 Atlético Madrid came calling, the Madrid club paying Independiente €20 million for a player who the year before had helped Argentina to win the U20 World Cup, a tournament illuminated by a tousle-haired attacker named Lionel Messi. The pair would repeat the feat at the 2007 U20 World Cup, in which Agüero would score six goals in seven games, and win Olympic gold at the 2008 Games in Beijing.

THE REIGN IN SPAIN

Any concerns that Agüero would struggle to adjust to a new life in Spain were rapidly dispelled by a number of dynamic performances, and Atlético's record-breaking acquisition would finish his first season with seven goals. A portent of things to come, Agüero would go on to score 101 goals for Atlético in 234 appearances, helping Los Colchoneros (the Mattresses) to Europa League glory, setting up both goals in a 2-1 win over Fulham in the final. A number of eye-catching displays served to elevate his profile further, including a man-of-the-match performance in a 4-2 defeat of Barcelona in 2008 and a brace against Chelsea in the 2009-10 Champions League. In his final season with the club he scored 20 La Liga goals, a target reached with the help of a first career hat-trick in his final game at the Vicente Calderón.

Despite signing a contract extension on 4 January 2011 that would have tied him to Atlético until 2014, on 23 May Agüero asked to leave the club. Aggrieved at their star man's volte face, a segment of Atlético fans made their anger known by unfurling a banner informing the departing Agüero that they wished him dead. It had no effect, and on 28 July, Atlético's former charge was unveiled at his new club: Manchester City.

WELCOME TO MANCHESTER

Agüero's move to Manchester was a statement of real intent from City, who had parted with £38 million in order to sign the Argentine on a five-year deal that would see Agüero paid £52 million. The transfer made Agüero the sixth most expensive player in history at the time, an outlay that, despite his previous goalscoring feats, represented a tangible risk on City's behalf. Fortunately for both the club and its supporters, Agüero would pay the fee back with interest.

Above Agüero lashes home his second goal on his debut against Swansea City **Below** Nobody has scored more Premier League hat-tricks than Sergio Agüero

On 15 August 2011, City hosted Swansea at home in their opening game of the new Premier League season. With the hour mark approaching and City 1-0 up thanks to an Edin Džeko strike, manager Roberto Mancini decided to introduce Agüero into the fray in place of Nigel de Jong. Sporting the number 16 shirt, Agüero jogged onto the pitch to a warm round of applause. Within eight minutes he would return the gesture.

Working the ball out to the right flank, the City midfield fed an onrushing Micah Richards, who dashed into the box and slipped a pass across the face of the Swansea goal. Agüero slid in to meet it and open his City account with a brave finish, and he was far from done tormenting the newly promoted Swans. By full time he'd set ▸



CITY'S GOAL-DEN BOY

Shearer. Rooney. Cole. Henry. When it comes to the greatest strikers in Premier League history, the same names dominate the conversation, relentless marksmen who constantly found a way to engineer chances and hit the back of the net. With his City career now at an end, Agüero sits comfortably among such esteemed company, the most prolific foreign player in the history of the competition with 184 goals in 275 games and fourth on the list overall. But how does he measure up against the league's most lethal poachers? The answer is that in most areas he in fact eclipses them all.

Since his debut against Swansea in 2011, Agüero has scored a goal approximately every 108 minutes, giving him the best goals-to-minutes ratio in Premier League history. Over his ten years in England, he has faced 33 different teams in the league, scoring against all of them with the exception of Bolton Wanderers, who he has only ever faced once. Within his incredible goal tally lies an astonishing 12 hat-tricks, a record that he set when scoring a treble against Aston Villa in 2020 to overtake Alan Shearer's previous record of 11. One of these trebles came in a match against Newcastle in which Agüero scored five times, a feat only ever managed on five occasions in Premier League history.

With a shooting accuracy of 44 per cent, Agüero sits ahead of Rooney on 38 and level with Henry. He has also won the Premier League Player of the Month award a record seven times and holds five Premier League winner's medals, the same amount as Rooney and Cole, three more than Henry and four more than Shearer.

When the latter was recently asked to sum up Agüero, the former Newcastle legend proffered the highest praise. "Class, quality, goals, touch, technique. Just a wonderful all-round centre forward who has been brilliant for Manchester City and the Premier League. All we can say is thank you for the entertainment he has given us."

Images Manchester City/Getty (shirt); Denis Doyle/Getty (Atlético Madrid); Chris Brunskill/Getty (vs Swansea); Michael Regan/Getty (goals)

David Silva up with an audacious volleyed assist when the ball seemed destined to go out of play for a goal kick, and then rounded off his stellar debut with a sumptuous 25-yard drive to secure an impressive 4-0 win. It had only taken half an hour of football for the City fans to fall in love with their new striker.

Agüero's rich vein of form continued in the early stages of the season as he plundered a goal against Tottenham, a hat-trick against a stricken Wigan Athletic, a brace away to Fulham and the third goal in a famous 6-1 demolition of Manchester United at Old Trafford on 23 October. Victory in the derby saw City move five points clear of the defending champions and sent shockwaves through the Premier League.

However, United were far from beaten, and as the season wore on they steadily closed the gap on City before overtaking them in March. By the time of United's visit to the Etihad on 30 April the Red Devils were three points ahead at the top of the table and closing in on another successful title defence. City knew they had to win. Cue a thumping header from captain Vincent Kompany to clinch a vital 1-0 victory to level the race with just two games to go.

Both sides followed the April derby with victories, thereby setting up a captivating final day in the title race. Armed with a vastly superior goal difference, City's task was simple: match or better United's result, and they would be champions for only the third time in their history and the first time in 44 years. With relegation-threatened QPR coming to the Etihad while United travelled to Sunderland, the destiny of the Premier League trophy seemed like a foregone conclusion. It would prove to be anything but.

CHAMPAGNE SUPERNOVA

It seemed initially that QPR would gamely follow the script on the final day of the season when Pablo Zabaleta fired City ahead. However, things turned upside down as QPR drew level shortly after half time and then snatched the lead on 66 minutes, despite having Joey Barton dismissed. Suddenly, City were staring into the abyss. They now had to score twice to wrestle the title from United, who were leading at Sunderland. For the next 25 minutes they would toil in vain until Džeko levelled proceedings with a header from a David Silva corner in stoppage time. But 2-2 wouldn't be enough. Not now news of United's victory was filtering into a stunned Etihad.

Refusing to admit defeat, City continued to attack, and on 94 minutes Agüero received the ball on the edge of the QPR box. With seconds to go he fed a tumbling Balotelli, who returned the ball as Agüero skipped into the area. Collecting the Italian's pass, Agüero calmly sidestepped a lunging challenge to rifle the ball beyond Paddy Kenny in the QPR goal and unleash bedlam. Peeling off his shirt, Agüero raced away in jubilation, having scored the single most important goal in City's history to seal the most dramatic title win ever in the Premier League. "I swear you'll never see anything like this ever again!" cried Sky Sports' Martin Tyler as the stadium erupted. City had reached the promised land thanks to a goal that Agüero has since described as "the best moment of my life".

HITS AND MISSES

Unsurprisingly, after securing immortality, Agüero found it difficult to immediately reach such heights again. An injury-plagued second season reduced Agüero to 12 Premier League goals in 30 games during a campaign that saw United finish 11 points clear as league champions. To compound City's disappointment, Mancini's side contrived to lose 1-0 to relegated Wigan in the FA Cup final, a result that contributed to the Italian's dismissal just two days later.

City soon appointed former Málaga manager Manual Pellegrini, and the decision reaped instant rewards as the Cityzens won the 2013-14 Premier League title and the League Cup (the first of six League Cup victories for Agüero), their domestic campaign fuelled by 17 goals in just 23 appearances from Agüero.



Above Agüero gets on the score sheet for City for the last time **Below** Agüero slides home his fifth goal against Newcastle in just 20 minutes of play

In a strange twist of irony, Agüero's most prolific season for City then followed in 2014-15, but would be unaccompanied by silverware as City finished second in the league behind champions Chelsea despite the Argentine's 26 goals, a tally that secured him the Golden Boot award. Committed to the club until 2019 thanks to a new contract in August 2014, Agüero was now faced with his first trophyless season in England. His only reward in 2015 was being handed the number 10 shirt following Džeko's departure to Roma. Thankfully for both Agüero and the club he had served so well, a new, pioneering manager would replace Pellegrini in 2016, a man whose arrival would herald the most golden age in City history: Pep Guardiola.

Supplemented by a host of new team-mates, including Ilkay Gündoğan and Leroy Sane, and with Kevin De Bruyne beginning to fulfil his enormous potential, City clicked into place under the Spaniard's guidance. With Agüero leading the line, City finished third in Guardiola's first season before then embarking on an unprecedented campaign that saw them become the first team to win 100 points in a Premier League season, Agüero once more breaking the 20-goal barrier and helping his side to another League Cup win. City retained both titles in the 2018-19 season, again with the help of 21 league goals from their Argentine star. They also added the FA Cup to their bulging



"AGÜERO DESCRIBED THE GOAL AS 'THE BEST MOMENT OF MY LIFE'"

AGÜERO BY NUMBERS

260 GOALS IN **390** MAN CITY APPEARANCES

184 GOALS IN **275** PREMIER LEAGUE GAMES

20 GOALS IN **22** FA CUP APPEARANCES

36 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GOALS FOR MAN CITY

5 IN GOALS SCORED IN ONE MATCH AGAINST NEWCASTLE, A JOINT RECORD IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE

12 PREMIER LEAGUE HAT-TRICKS - A RECORD

47 PREMIER LEAGUE ASSISTS FOR MAN CITY

5 PREMIER LEAGUE TITLES

108 AGÜERO'S MINUTES-PER-GOAL RATIO THE BEST IN PL HISTORY

0.66 GOALS PER MATCH



Above Agüero scores a stunning solo goal in the Manchester derby in 2013
Below Holding Premier League title number four after beating Brighton 4-1 on the final day of 2018-19 season

cabinet, completing the first English domestic treble in history.

Yet while domestic dominance was becoming almost routine for Guardiola's men, their efforts on the European stage continued to frustrate, most notably in the quarter-finals of the 2018-19 Champions League. Drawn with English rivals Spurs, City were awarded a penalty in the early stages of the first leg at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, only to see Hugo Lloris save Agüero's effort. The Argentine's miss would ultimately prove fatal as Spurs won an incredible second leg 4-3 to progress.

Closer to home, City's stranglehold on the league would end in the 2019-20 season as Liverpool romped to their first title in 30 years during a campaign bereft of fans due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time in his tenure, questions were being asked of Guardiola. Agüero, who for the first time had failed to score 20 or more goals in the league, but was by now the most prolific foreign player in Premier League history, would soon face his own personal questions too. His final season in Manchester was looming. He just didn't know it yet.

DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER

It's no secret that football can often be a cruel game, one devoid of any sense of sentiment. Even so, it seems especially unfair that Agüero's final season in England, a fact announced in late March 2021 by a grateful but cool-headed City, has been so devastated by injury and illness. Reduced to just 12 league appearances (and four goals) by a combination of knee ruptures and Covid-19, Agüero has been a shadow of his former lethal self, another Premier League and League Cup double and a Champions League runners-up medal offering little consolation to a player used to defining the biggest games.



A lack of match fitness threatened to rob him of the chance of a final farewell at home to Everton on the last day of the season before his move to Barcelona, but thankfully he was able to make a brief cameo appearance, during which he netted twice to eclipse Wayne Rooney as the scorer of the most Premier League goals for a single club.

However, dejected as Agüero and his supporters may be to see him leave, City's all-time record goalscorer will not be judged by his denouement. No, he will be remembered for transforming the fortunes of a club that before him had only harboured dreams of breaching the top six. Fans will recount his title-winning goal in 2012, the Manchester derbies he settled, the day he netted four against a bamboozled Leicester, having done likewise to Spurs a few seasons before. They will speak lovingly of the hat-trick against Aston Villa in January 2020 that elevated Agüero above all other foreign goalscorers to have graced the English top flight. They will reminisce about his 36 goals in the Champions League, including hat-tricks against Bayern Munich and Borussia Mönchengladbach. Ultimately, they will cherish that beaming smile and a name that will forever be synonymous with their club. And they won't be the only ones.

When asked who the best striker in the world is, Guardiola was typically frank. "Messi. Messi is number nine, ten, 11, six, four. But the rest is Sergio." Neil Custis of the *Sun* newspaper was equally effusive when recently asked about Agüero's legacy. "If I was a manager and I had Agüero, I'd play him on one leg, never mind when he's nearly fit. He is the best foreign player ever to play in the Premier League."

When appraising Agüero's truly groundbreaking career in England it seems fitting to give the last word to the man himself, who upon the news of his impending departure going public was typically humble. "With the guidance of the owners and contributions of many players, we earned a place among the greatest in the world." That is true, Sergio, but nobody has earned the same place in the hearts of City fans, the boy from the potrero who never dared dream of Europe forever woven into the tapestry of a club that he called home.

Images Manchester City/Getty (vs Newcastle); Michael Regan/Getty (trophy); Matthew Ashton/AMA/Corbis/Getty (vs Manchester United); Peter Powell/Pool/Getty Images (vs Everton)



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
AUGUST 2021

YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

Jack Grealish became a national icon this summer, despite starting only once for England at Euro 2020 – such is the appeal of Manchester City's £100-million man. Yet reaching cult status hasn't been straightforward for Britain's costliest player, who has battled family tragedy, derby day carnage and a near-death experience

Words Chris Flanagan **Portraits** Matt McNulty

The man was wearing a flat cap, as he raced from the stand and swung a punch into the back of Jack Grealish's head.

The Second City Derby was just nine minutes old, and St Andrew's was in chaos. As Aston Villa's Tammy Abraham and a steward teamed up to wrestle the pitch invader to the ground, Grealish sat stunned on the turf, trying to process what had just happened.

He'd been facing the other way, with no reason to suspect any imminent danger, when the fan rushed out from Birmingham City's Tilton Road end. The first thing Grealish knew about it was as the blow connected with his head. The pitch invader was messing with the wrong man, at exactly the wrong time. Grealish had endured two and a half years of misery by then, having been unable to help his boyhood club out of the Championship. Only a week earlier, though, with Villa 13th in the table in early March 2019, Grealish had returned from a three-month injury lay-off and been made captain for the first time.

In that comeback game, he'd scored the best goal of his career to put Villa 4-0 up at half-time against Frank Lampard's Derby, meeting a corner with a thunderous volley from the edge of the box reminiscent of Paul Scholes at his very best.

So, at St Andrew's, the new Villa skipper knew how to react to such an unprovoked attack. Not by leaping up and chasing the wannabe Peaky Blinder, but by calmly taking stock, then letting his feet do the talking. Midway through the second half, Grealish fashioned an opening inside the Birmingham penalty area and struck the winner.

"It's the best day of my life," he beamed afterwards. "I just tried to get on with my job. I think I did."

Grealish's first two games as captain would begin a club-record run of 10 consecutive wins, propelling Villa to the play-offs and promotion out of nowhere. It was the pivotal week of his career, a moment from which he's never looked back.

Just two years later, he's an Aston Villa great, an England hero – and now Britain's first £100-million player. Pep Guardiola and Manchester City don't spend that sort of cash without very good reason. It takes more than a pitch invader to stop Jack Grealish...

"IT WAS LIKE LOOKING AT MARADONA"

Across 213 Villa outings, Grealish delivered countless memorable moments. It was during one of the most memorable weekends of the club's pre-Grealish era, though, that tragedy struck his family.

A lifelong Villa supporter himself, Grealish's father Kevin had been in London ahead of the club's FA Cup semi-final victory over Bolton in 2000, when he received a terrible phone call and immediately rushed back to the West Midlands. Nine-month-old Keelan Grealish, four years Jack's junior, had died in his cot. "You never ever get over losing a child," Kevin later said. "Jack was only a kid, but he still remembers Keelan. He thinks about him with everything he achieves."

Grealish's younger sister Holly has cerebral palsy, and the family have always been incredibly close-knit. Jack's Irish heritage prompted him to take up Gaelic football as a youngster, which even involved a trip to Dublin to play for Warwickshire during half-time of the 2009 All-Ireland quarter-final between Dublin and Kerry at the cavernous Croke Park.

Football was always going to win the duel for his affections, however. He'd joined Villa as a six-year-old, after being spotted by scout Jim Thomas during a game on a local playing field. "You couldn't miss him," said Thomas. "He was very small, but he dribbled right the way through the team. It was like looking at Maradona."

Villa knew they had a special talent. As Grealish progressed through the age groups, he continued to stand out – and not just for his giant calves and rolled-down socks, the latter borne out of superstition.

"One season, the socks we had kept shrinking and I wasn't a first-team player, so I couldn't ask for a new pair every day," he explained. "They wouldn't come over my calves. That season I started kicking on as a player, so I kept that as my style."

At 16, Villa's first-team boss was starting to pay real attention. "When we had a home match, we could normally attend academy games on a Saturday morning," Alex McLeish tells *FFT*. "This little guy captivated me every time I watched a game, I've got to say. The club were very excited about him – Bryan Jones was in charge of the academy at the time. I used to stand on the touchline, and it was like going to watch Michael Laudrup or something. I just wanted to see him get the ball time and time again."

It wasn't only McLeish who was impressed – other clubs were, too. With Grealish soon out of contract, compensation rules meant that Villa could have lost their starlet for as little as £200,000.

"We were told that Jack and his father had been in Rio Ferdinand's restaurant with an agent who was attempting to take him to Manchester United," says McLeish. "Bryan was conscious that other people were about to swoop, and it was very important that we got Jack on board again. We had to come up with a wee strategy to make sure he stayed at Aston Villa.







> "IF THIS MERCURIAL KID LEFT AND BECAME A STAR WE'D BE REMEMBERED... AND NOT IN A GOOD WAY"

"Bryan asked me to be involved with it, and a lot of credit has to go to him – the fact he came to myself as the manager showed it was a critical situation, because normally the academy guys just get deals done and dusted. They don't really need the manager's supervision on it.

"We both agreed that it would be an absolute disaster for Villa if this mercurial kid left. He was showing such potential, what was he going to become? If he moved and became a superstar, we'd be remembered for that... and not in a good way.

"So I met Jack and his dad, and they came into my office. Jack loved the club, his dad as well, and they were both really keen for him to stay put provided we came to a decent agreement. Bryan had been conscious of the club's budget and how far you can go with an academy kid, but we made sure he got the best deal going – probably the highest for an academy boy at that time."

As part of Villa's efforts to show how much they valued Grealish's presence, McLeish also put the 16-year-old on the substitutes' bench for a Premier League fixture against Chelsea in March 2012. Such a ruse had the added bonus of potentially increasing his value at a tribunal, should he depart that summer.

"It was to give Jack a bit of the big time, but also we had to try to protect ourselves if he left and there was a fee to be decided," explains McLeish. "The powers that be would maybe say it was £500,000 or £600,000 – I'm not sure what the figure would have been, but the bargain basement price would have been absolutely disastrous. Any price would have been, because you can see what he's become."

Grealish soon committed his future to Villa, signing his first professional contract. That deal effectively saved the club more than £99m. "I wish I'd negotiated a little part of that for myself!" chuckles McLeish.



Clockwise from top "Say cheese"; Derry trusted Grealish at Notts County; "Tommy Shelby will be in touch"; en route to NextGen glory

NOTTS SO FAST, SON

McLeish departed B6 that summer and was replaced by fellow Scot Paul Lambert. It would be two years until Grealish made his first-team bow for Villa – he was promoted to the under-19s alongside players two years his senior and helped the club win the NextGen Series, a precursor event to the UEFA Youth League.

"He was miles ahead of anything else in his age group – that's why he was pushed into our team," says Graham Burke, who joint-top scored in the tournament. "He was one of the standout players among older boys, and it's not often you see that. His dribbling was so good. He'd go past two or three and he wasn't satisfied – he'd stop, come back on himself and go again. The ball was glued to his foot."

In the group stage, Villa travelled to Lisbon and shellacked Sporting 5-1. "Then we beat Ajax, with their famous academy," continues Burke, now with Shamrock Rovers in his native Ireland. "In the semi-finals we played Sporting again, and Jack put us ahead in extra time – that was a huge goal. We played Chelsea in the final and they had a good team, but he won a penalty and I scored it. I don't think anyone expected us to win the tournament, but it showed the quality we had – out of that side, it was Jack who really excelled and went on to make it.

"It was a different brand of football against European teams, but it didn't matter what country Jack was in or what pitch he was on, he was so comfortable in every situation.

"He'd go past people with ease, he could pick a pass, he could put a team on his back and drive them along, which he did in the semi-final against Sporting. He's the best player I've ever played with. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time until he got his first-team opportunity."

As it transpired, though, Grealish's first senior experience wasn't at Villa, but on loan at Notts County. "Paul Lambert was good for me, but I had a little falling out with him and I don't think he wanted me around, so he said, 'You're going on loan'," Grealish later recalled with a wry smile. ▸



"JACK IS A MAVERICK. HE HAD A DIFFERENT KIND OF BELIEF – NOT ARROGANCE, JUST A SUPERIOR BELIEF"

Arriving at Meadow Lane just days after his 18th birthday in September 2013, he joined a club sitting rock-bottom of League One. On his first start, the Magpies lost 5-1 at Leyton Orient, and not long after that, boss Chris Kiwomya departed. Shaun Derry took on his first managerial role.

"As soon as the session started on my first day, I realised we had a very special player," Derry tells *FFT*. "The technical aspect of Jack's game was above the level of a League One player. Callum McGregor [of Celtic] was there, too, both young players on loan."

At first, the manager had to find a way to accommodate Grealish's talent while trying to turn around results. "We didn't go into Notts County and find that it clicked straight away," he says. "It was a tough period, and at times you're searching for answers; you're open to making changes and experimenting with the team. But I had a conversation with my assistant Greg Abbott, who said it was about trusting a young player, putting your belief in him and letting him experience some pretty poor performances – moments when it would have been easier just to bring him off after an hour and then leave him out of the next game."

Grealish repaid that belief in a December clash with Gillingham. With three minutes to go, he picked the ball up on the left before sashaying past three defenders to the other side of the penalty box. Racing into the area, he slammed a shot into the top corner – not bad for your first senior goal.

"That was the big moment, to see a special goal like that, in a game that was important to us," remembers Derry. "His dad was in the stadium and he ran straight to him – I think he got booked because he ran into the crowd! I played for Notts County when I was 18 and my dad watched my games, too – those are brilliant moments.

"At Villa, Jack had probably been playing in teams that were winning, so it was a different challenge for him. It was a pressure pot environment at Notts County: a big League One club who didn't want to get relegated to League Two. Opponents would be physical with him, which was a learning curve – he'd take some heavy blows and sometimes he didn't like it, but he always got back on his feet and had the bravery to take people on again and again.

"As a person, he was incredibly humble and polite. Whenever I had any one-to-one conversations with him, he was a smart kid. He was still a bit immature in some ways – he'd probably not recognise the importance of certain drills we did, because all he wanted was to have the ball at his feet. Off the field there were situations – only once or twice, not often – where perhaps his timekeeping let him down slightly or he made a couple of wrong decisions. That's to be expected of an 18-year-old, though."

But on the pitch, Grealish's effervescence captivated Meadow Lane regulars like few before or since.

"He was outstanding and soon became our go-to guy; someone we could rely on to win games," continues Derry. "He had a different kind of belief – it wasn't arrogance, just this superior belief that he knew he was a good player. I love those players.

"Sometimes in football, we're at fault for overlooking individuality – we're forever looking for a perfect shape and system, and we've got to be careful with individual talents like Jack who want to go for the jugular and take on the opposition. Sometimes they're going to lose possession, but they get people off their seats.

"Jack is a maverick, and I played with a few: Adel Taarabt at QPR was a magician, but frustrating at the same time. At Portsmouth we had Robert Prosinecki, who was amazing but could be found wanting on the defensive side because he didn't really see the value of that. Playing with them helped me to handle someone like Jack.

"You had to be honest with him, and some days Jack didn't like what I said. Generally, it





Clockwise from top Grealish made 19 youth appearances for Ireland; sent off in the cup; Notts proved Grealish's baptism of fire

was the arm around the shoulder and telling him how good he was. That's what I wanted, actually, to tell him just how good he was. Because he was..."

Grealish's loan deal was due to expire in January, but he opted to stay and continue the club's battle against relegation.

"Villa wanted him back, and he could have gone to clubs at Championship level," reveals Derry. "But I spoke to Jack and his dad, to encourage them to put a little bit of pressure on Villa from their end. Jack wanted to finish what he'd started. He'd enjoyed it with us and stayed loyal to the cause. If he hadn't stayed, we'd have been relegated."

As it was, Grealish's five goals and seven assists ensured Notts County's survival on the final day of the League One season. He was a talisman at 18.

COUNTRY VS COUNTRY

Four days later, Lambert handed him his Villa debut, as a late substitute in the Premier League at Manchester City. In the early parts of 2014-15, Grealish was a regular member of the matchday squad, even if his appearances off the bench were only fleeting – a lot more so than many Villa fans would have liked.

A clamour had already grown for the teen talent, who had penned a fresh four-year contract to ward off interest from Chelsea and was widely regarded as the Midlanders' great new hope. But Lambert took a cautious approach in terms of game time, eager not to expose Grealish to too much too soon.

"Paul was good with young players," says Michael Watts, Villa's head of performance at the time. "There were a lot of calls for Jack to be playing regularly, but the manager's job was to protect him and make sure he could develop. You see cases like Michael Owen and Wayne Rooney who were superstars at 16 or 17, but sometimes people say they weren't protected at that young age, which eventually leads to injuries and problems further down the line.

"Part of their development is drip-feeding them because they're still boys – they're not physically developed or used to that amount of training and competition."

Owen and Rooney peaked at a young age, but Grealish continues to improve as he enters his late 20s.

"People focus on his technical ability, but athletically he was really gifted, too," adds Watts. "He was up there with the first-team squad even at 17 or 18 – he was an anomaly at that age, because players don't tend to stop developing physically until about 23 or 24. If you wanted him to produce strength and power, he could do that. If you wanted him to be aerobically strong and run all day, he could do that.

"You never saw him get stressed out either – he'd never overthink stuff. He had the full package and he simply loves football. If Jack wasn't a professional footballer, he'd still be playing on the parks every week. Even in gym sessions, he'd still have a football – you'd have to tell him to put it away."

Lambert had gone by the time Villa hosted West Brom in a 2015 FA Cup quarter-final. New boss Tim Sherwood chucked Grealish on for an eventful cameo – in 16 minutes he laid on the assist that settled the tie, before being sent off for collecting two yellow cards, the second for simulation.

Despite the dismissal, Sherwood had seen enough to be impressed: soon Grealish was starting regularly, as the Villans moved out of relegation trouble and stunned Liverpool in the FA Cup semi-finals. "I was at Wembley that day, and for me he was the best player on the pitch," says Burke.

It was a special moment for the whole Grealish family.

"When I remember the FA Cup semi-final against Bolton and the news we received that day, then I think about the way Jack played against Liverpool – he brought us so much happiness," his father later explained.

Villa lost 4-0 to Arsenal in the final, but Grealish's performances prompted the culmination of a long-running tug of war – since 2011, both England and the Republic of Ireland had been vying for his services.

"I was head of talent ID with the FA – I'd seen Jack play a few times and I liked him," says Kenny Swain, a European Cup winner with Villa in 1982. "We'd identify players at 15, monitor them over that season, then call them into a training camp. I thought he was a talented player and Villa's academy manager Bryan Jones said, 'Kenny, I think he's as good as we've had in my time here'. That's some praise, because the club have produced some good players over the years. Jack came along to the first training camp and got through the first day OK, but then went home ill."

Overnight, Grealish collapsed.

"I was in the bathroom, then I woke up on the floor," he later explained. "I don't know whether it was nerves, I'm not sure. The next day I was ready to train again, but for medical reasons I couldn't."

The next time England called Grealish up, he had to go home again because of injury.

"Then towards the end of the season, we were at the Nordic Tournament hosted by Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and the Faroe Islands," explains Swain. "This was ▸

IN THE GENES

Jack Grealish isn't the first member of his family to have represented England and Aston Villa – his great-great grandfather did the same more than 100 years ago.

Three of his grandparents hail from Ireland, but another strand of his family links back to West Midlander Billy Garraty (circled), a lethal inside-right who earned one England cap in a 2-1 victory over Wales at Fratton Park in 1903.

He was the First Division's top scorer with 27 goals when Aston Villa won the league in 1899-1900, and went on to make 260 appearances for the club. Garraty also helped them to beat Newcastle 2-0 in the 1905 FA Cup Final, watched by more than 100,000 supporters at Crystal Palace.



my one chance to look at him again – it was an eight- or 10-day trip, so we'd properly get to know him. I rang Bryan Jones and he said, 'Take him, no problem', but later I heard he wasn't coming. I contacted his mum to say I thought he'd have an absolutely fabulous time with us, but she said she didn't think he wanted to go. He was being courted by the FAI, who played him above his age group, which was a temptation."

Grealish turned out for Republic of Ireland Under-17s and Under-18s, at a time when England's record in the younger age groups wasn't quite what it is now.

"That was one of the rare occasions when we didn't qualify for the finals of the UEFA Under-17 Championship," England's then coach John Peacock tells *FFT*. "Qualification is about fine margins – with Jack involved, who knows if we would have made it? He'd always been at the forefront of our thinking."

But even after Grealish began to represent Ireland, there was still uncertainty about his long-term international future.

"At one point, his dad approached me and said, 'I think Jack's ready to have a go with England'," says Swain. "I met up with them, took them to St George's Park and introduced them to the under-19s manager Noel Blake, and the technical director Dan Ashworth.

I'd already asked Blakey if he thought Jack was up to the mark and good enough to play a year higher up.

"Blakey was going to invite him into the U19s squad the following month, and again, I don't know what happened. He stayed with the Republic and they put him in the U21s, but we did try awfully hard."

Ireland boss Martin O'Neill had even tried to call Grealish up for their senior squad in 2014, during a period when his assistant Roy Keane was also Paul Lambert's number two at Villa. Grealish politely declined, deciding at that point to keep his options open. England Under-21 boss Gareth Southgate confirmed that renewed attempts were underway to persuade him to represent the Three Lions.

Not long after Grealish helped Villa to the FA Cup final, Ireland made another attempt to select him for the senior squad – this time for a Euro 2016 qualifier against Scotland, and a friendly... against England. Minutes before the squad announcement, though, Grealish was removed from the list. Again, he wasn't ready to commit.

That August, he met with Roy Hodgson in a box at Villa Park, after a match against Manchester United. A month later, Grealish confirmed that he'd decided to play for England after all.



THE NOUS THAT JACK BUILT

No one won more free-kicks in the Premier League than Jack Grealish last season...

Jack Grealish	110
Wilfried Zaha	88
Adama Traoré	86
Sadio Mané	78
John McGinn	77
Richarlison	73
Eberechi Eze	72
Bukayo Saka	64
Conor Gallagher	63
Jordan Ayew	63

Left The starlet shone against Guinea in 2016 **Right** Manager Bruce made sure Jack was alright

"It was a relief when I heard that," Swain smiles now. "I thought 'Bloody hell, at last!'."

"JACK, YOU COULD DIE..."

Grealish started that 2015-16 campaign as a Villa regular once more, but his career was about to take an unexpected turn. Despite his presence, the team lost seven league games in a row and Sherwood was sacked, with the club bottom of the Premier League table. They remained there for the rest of the season – Grealish had a difficult relationship with replacement Remi Garde, who dropped him to the under-21s for visiting a nightclub hours after a 4-0 thumping at Everton. The Frenchman wasn't an admirer of Grealish's happy-go-lucky approach to life.

"He just told me off for smiling," the baffled playmaker once told Gabriel Agbonlahor.

Garde lasted only until late March, but Grealish finished the campaign by setting a new Premier League record: he featured in 16 games... and lost all of them. Few blamed the player – just like Gareth Bale's 24-match winless start at Tottenham, the record was symptomatic of the team's general malaise.

"As a club, we were a mess at that point," remembers Michael Watts. "There were a lot of things going on behind the scenes and it was a difficult dressing room to be in. I've never experienced so much dysfunction in one season. The fans and maybe people inside the club were looking at Jack to save the club, to do something crazy-special and pull a rabbit out of a hat. But no matter how talented Jack was, it was too much to ask – there were another 28 players who needed to do more as well."

For the first time in 28 years, Aston Villa were facing life outside the top flight. It was a devastating blow for Grealish, the boyhood fan, and the player with England ambitions.

He did still get his first Three Lions call-up that summer, linking up with Southgate's under-21 squad at the Toulon Tournament. He scored twice in a 7-1 win over Guinea too, but started only two of England's five games – the midfielder was an unused substitute when they defeated France in the final, with Ruben Loftus-Cheek taking the No.10 role.

Grealish didn't make the next U21 squad before Southgate became the senior team boss. On the first day of the Championship campaign under new Villa chief Roberto Di Matteo, he found himself on the bench for a miserable loss at Sheffield Wednesday.

"He was streets above everybody else in that squad – he shouldn't have been playing in the Championship," recalls Tommy Elphick, Villa's new captain after joining that summer. "He had a hunger to get the club back where they belonged and shouldered much of that responsibility, but he didn't start the opening game. The manager wanted to go for a bit more experience and know-how, but training with him, I remember thinking, 'How is this lad not starting?'."

Villa were a lowly 19th when Di Matteo was sacked after just 11 league games – a period during which Grealish had again irritated his boss by reportedly heading to an all-night

"MAKING JACK CAPTAIN WAS A MASTERSTROKE. HE AND DEAN SMITH WERE BOYHOOD VILLA FANS AND BUZZED OFF EACH OTHER"

party. Di Matteo became the third successive Villa boss to publicly admonish the No.10 for his off-field actions; Sherwood had also been forced to intervene, after pictures emerged of Grealish sprawled in the street following a night out in Tenerife.

Grealish had problems on the field, too: during Steve Bruce's first match in charge, television cameras caught him stamping on Wolves defender Conor Coady, resulting in a retrospective three-match ban. In February 2017, he was sent off for a second bookable offence against Nottingham Forest and then spent two months on the bench.

Villa finished down in 13th, and Grealish's career was in serious danger of stalling. Aidy Boothroyd called him up for the 2017 U21 Euros, but Grealish didn't play a single minute at the finals in Poland. After the tug of war for his services, he was about to turn 22, and there was a genuine threat that his England prospects could be over almost as quickly as they had begun.

A week before the start of the new season, things got even worse. Facing Watford in a tribute match for the late Graham Taylor, Grealish took an accidental knee in the back while jumping for a header with Tom Cleverley.

"My kidney split in two places – it was pouring with blood internally for about five hours," Grealish later revealed. "It's the worst pain I've ever been in. I was rushed in for an operation – before it happened, the surgeon had to tell me the consequences of what could happen if it didn't work. He looked me in the eye and said, 'Jack, you could die'. I was genuinely scared."



The surgery was successful, but Grealish spent three months on the sidelines. He was grateful for the way Bruce had regularly kept in contact during the darkest moments, and returned more determined than ever to repay his manager's concern.

Also guided by the newly arrived John Terry, Grealish helped Villa to reach the play-offs, then came close to a sensational solo goal at Wembley, in a final they ultimately lost to Fulham. There would be a third season in the Championship to come.

Worse still, for a period that summer, Villa looked to be in dire financial trouble. Spurs began to circle for Grealish and Bruce even admitted that his sale looked inevitable. Villa were said to be ready to accept just £6m, but chairman Daniel Levy took his time over negotiations and attempted to force the fee down further. It proved a bad move: Villa's finances were suddenly aided by a takeover and the asking price rocketed to £40m. "If Jack had joined Tottenham that summer, there's no doubt in my mind that Aston Villa wouldn't be in the Premier League today," insists Elphick.

Even with their star man still at the club, however, promotion initially looked unlikely. Villa started 2018-19 poorly, a fan threw a cabbage at Bruce, and the manager was sacked. Not long after Dean Smith's arrival, Grealish was ruled out for three months with a shin injury.

The Midlanders won only two of their next 13 games, and were drifting to another mid-table finish: had it not been for Grealish's March return, and Smith's brainwave.

"Making Jack the captain was an absolute masterstroke from Smith," explains Elphick. "They are both boyhood Villa fans and they buzzed off each other.

"Dean has a wonderful way of not forgetting the human element to a football player – he'd come in sometimes and have craic with Jack over the last game, or a game that was on telly the night before. That period when he became the skipper was the making of Jack.

"He'd been out injured but was desperate to get back, and the amount of work he was doing in the gym was unbelievable. He came back a completely different specimen.

"In his first game as the captain, he scored that outstanding volley against Derby which whistled over my head. Then there was the Birmingham episode, which could have been a really serious moment – the lad who got on the pitch could have been carrying anything. Jack could have thought, 'I need to get off, my head's not in the right place', but his way of getting back at that fella was by scoring the winning goal." ▸

Villa charged into the play-off semi-final against West Brom. The tie went to a penalty shootout at The Hawthorns – Grealish scored and Villa were heading back to Wembley. This time, they defeated Derby to return to the top flight. After three Championship campaigns, captain Jack was back in the big time.

SUPER JACK, SUPER SUB

Grealish only had one Premier League goal to his name at that point, but another eight followed in 2019-20 as Villa also reached the League Cup final, losing to Manchester City. The skipper had been imperious in a tough semi-final second leg against Leicester, delivering the assist for Matt Targett's opener to help send Villa through 3-2 on aggregate.

When lockdown hit two weeks after the final, Smith's side had lost four consecutive games – their last one, 4-0 to the Foxes – and sat 19th. Grealish hit the headlines again for the wrong reasons: hours after urging people to remain at home, he was photographed looking dishevelled after crashing his Range Rover into parked cars, wearing one black slipper and one white slider sandal. Criticism was widespread, but he responded on the field when the Premier League restarted. On a dramatic final day of the season, he rifled home at West Ham to secure Villa's safety. As if it could have been anyone else.

A clamour, not dissimilar to his younger days, was gathering for Grealish to get his first call-up to Southgate's England squad – only now, it was right across the country. Even Prince William, a Villa fan who sent a hand-written letter of support to Grealish following the St Andrew's attack, got involved in the campaign.

"I've given Gareth a little elbow nudge to say, 'Why is Grealish not in the England squad?'" he grinned.

Initially, Southgate resisted that friendly royal intervention, but when Marcus Rashford withdrew from the Three Lions' September fixtures through injury, Grealish was drafted in as a replacement and made his debut as a substitute in Denmark.

A week later, amid sustained interest from Manchester United and Arsenal, he signed a new five-year deal with Aston Villa which contained a £100m release clause. In early October, he bagged twice and assisted three more goals in a stunning 7-2 victory over champions Liverpool, as Villa won their first four games of the 2020-21 season.

The plaudits only intensified, not least after he started his first competitive England game against Belgium. Grealish befuddled Thomas Meunier with a backheeled flick over the wing-back's head in a performance so impressive that he immediately established himself among fans as the new Messiah, barely six months after he'd been a very naughty boy. That escalated quickly.

Despite that, a three-month injury lay-off ruled him out of England's March 2021 fixtures, with reports suggesting that even if fit again, he may be in danger of missing out on Southgate's Euro 2020 squad. UEFA's decision to increase squads to 26 players ended even the remotest possibility of that happening – particularly after he helped Villa beat soon-to-be European champions Chelsea on the final day of the campaign.







MILESTONE MEN

These five Brits all broke new ground – but only two of them have gone on to win a league title...



TREVOR FRANCIS
Francis became Britain's first six-figure man as Nottingham Forest paid £1.18m to snare him from Birmingham in 1979. Three months later he nodded the winner in the European Cup final, but Liverpool ended up as domestic champions.



CHRIS SUTTON
No British club had ever forked out £5m for a player when Blackburn signed Sutton from Norwich in July 1994 – but that very campaign, his SAS partnership with Alan Shearer lifted the Lancashire club to the Premier League summit.



ALAN SHEARER
Sutton's strike partner became the first British player to move for more than £10m when he joined Newcastle in 1996. The world-record £15m marksman delivered a club-record 206 goals and two FA Cup finals... but sadly no major honours.



RIO FERDINAND
The balletic centre-back was the first Brit to surpass the £25m mark – Manchester United signed him from Leeds for £29.1m in 2002, and were rewarded with six league titles and a European Cup. Not too bad for a kid from Peckham.



HARRY MAGUIRE
The first domestic star to join a British club for more than £50m was another defender transferring to Old Trafford. 'Slabhead' smashed the ceiling in an £80m deal from Leicester to United two years ago, but he's yet to pick up a trophy.



"GUARDIOLA IS THE GOD OF FOOTBALL – IT WILL BE GREAT TO SEE WHAT HE DOES WITH JACK"

At the Euros, Grealish's star rose further – despite starting just one game, against the Czech Republic, when England had already secured their place in the last 16. He set up Raheem Sterling's winner in that match, but for Grealish, the tournament was almost a flashback to his days as an 18-year-old under Paul Lambert: used sparingly as a super sub, while almost an entire fanbase pleaded for his inclusion.

"I went to Wembley to watch Jack play Scotland against Callum McGregor, and I was so proud of him and where he's got to," says Shaun Derry, his former boss at Notts County. "My son Jesse is 14, and his favourite player in the whole world is Jack Grealish – Jack was really kind to send him a lovely message a few months ago.

"Our national team has been crying out for somebody like Jack, and we want to see more of him. He gives you hope."

Against Germany, Grealish turned hope into reality. After his introduction from the bench was greeted by one of the loudest roars Wembley has ever heard, the Brummie magician provided the spark that won the last-16 clash by playing a part in both goals on a famous afternoon for England.

It seemed like the start of something, but sadly it didn't prove to be – Grealish was an unused sub against Ukraine during a thumping 4-0 victory in Rome, subbed on against Denmark in the semi-final, then subbed off again in the final minutes of extra time as Southgate sought more defensive solidity with England leading 2-1.

Released from the bench when the final against Italy headed to a shootout, Grealish hung around optimistically in Southgate's eyeline, desperate to be asked to step up, just as he had in the play-offs for Villa two years earlier. Once again he was overlooked – reports suggested he was eighth on the list, behind even goalkeeper Jordan Pickford.

Pep Guardiola had seen more than enough, however. If Southgate has held concerns about the defensive side of Grealish's game, the Manchester City manager clearly thinks they can be overcome – even the supremely talented Kevin De Bruyne has to work like a Trojan in Guardiola's system.

That one of the greatest managers of all time was prepared to make Grealish Britain's first £100m player tells you everything you need to know about the ability possessed by City's new signing. In 19 years on the books of his boyhood club, he established himself as an Aston Villa great. Now, he'll be playing Champions League football for the first time, and challenging for every major prize going.

"Dean Smith is a hell of a manager, but Pep Guardiola is regarded as the absolute God of football – he improves every player he works with and it will be great to see what he can do with Jack," says Grealish's former Villa team-mate Tommy Elphick.

"He gets better with better players around him, because he gets more space. He's like silk – he floats, he glides. He still has that innocence, why we all fall in love with football when we're kids; the ability to do something and wow a crowd. I'm so pleased at how he's done – he's got a heart of gold.

"He donated a load of stuff to a hospice, and I remember finding out that he'd paid for a Villa fan's funeral – not for attention, but because he cares. You could always tell that Jack loved Aston Villa."

Grealish's ultimate ambition may well be 15 months down the line. England resume their 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign with September fixtures against Hungary, Andorra and Poland – and the new £100m man will hope consistent game time in the Premier League's upper reaches convinces Southgate to give him a key role in Qatar next year.

"A few years ago I told Gareth Southgate, 'You lucky b*****d, you're going to inherit some of the best talent we've ever had,'" Kenny Swain smiles now. "After I'd finished at the FA, he came up to me and said, 'You were right'. Jack wasn't even an England player then – he's the bonus on top of that, and there's still more to come from him."

"He's gone from a precocious talent to a superstar," is how Alex McLeish sums it up.

From the start, everyone knew that Jack Grealish was capable of something special. In the past few weeks, he's made history – now, he's ready to take on the world.

Clockwise from above "What can you tell me about Olympic basketball?"; Grealish makes his City debut; "Do my calves look big in this?"

Relive the remarkable season that saw City scale historic heights en route to winning a spectacular treble

THE BLUE MOON

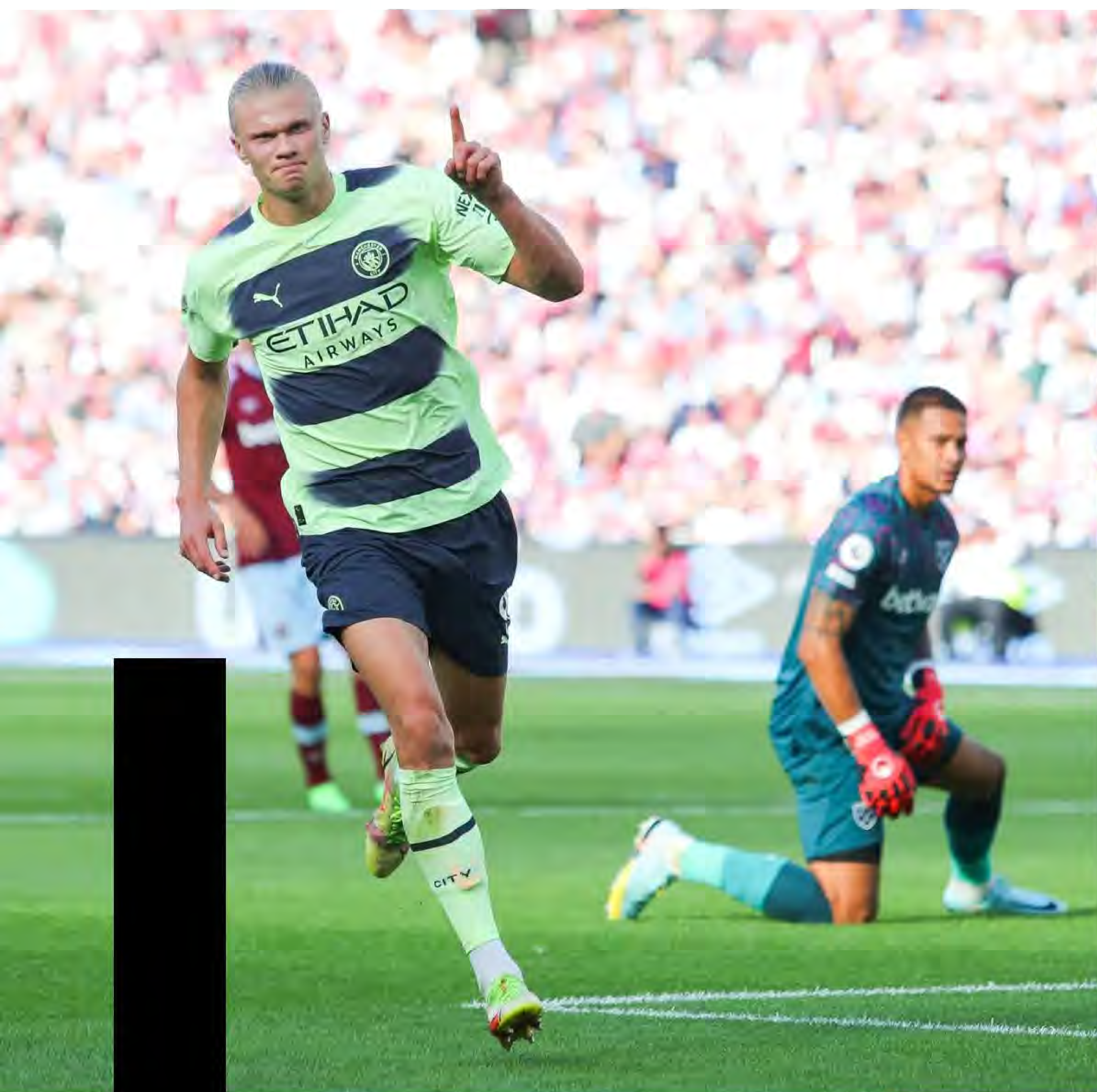
Words Charles Ginger



IS RISEN



Image Getty Images





Immortality. It is the ultimate achievement, a summit countless souls have strived to reach and yet only a chosen few have ever stood upon. Lined with hidden pitfalls and seemingly impossible obstacles, the route to this promised land is treacherous and unforgiving, and it regularly succeeds in casting those who attempt to scale the greatest heights back down into the land of mere mortals. Yet some manage to navigate the apparently insurmountable hurdles that separate the good from the great, be they a daring individual or a collectively superb team. On a sweltering night inside the cauldron of the Atatürk Stadium in Istanbul, Man City did just that, seizing their one clear chance to carve Inter Milan open and their names into the only trophy that eluded them.

As with any side that has touched the sky, the journey to that pivotal moment when Rodri swept home the most important goal in Man City's history was a long and arduous one. Although few and far between, there were of course setbacks, rare defeats and occasional draws against teams that City would usually defeat with little effort. And yet, despite playing 61 games across five competitions and reaching two out of a possible three finals, City's march to the treble was oddly lacking in jeopardy, at least until those frantic final minutes in Istanbul, when Inter somehow contrived not to equalise.

To fully appreciate the scale of their achievement one must start at the very beginning of a season that began with a series of high-profile departures and a number of even more attention-grabbing arrivals.

After defending their trophy once again in the face of an irrepressible Liverpool, City's title winners had more than earned a summer of sunning themselves, but while they jetted off to rest weary limbs their manager was already on manoeuvres, a general planning on how to reshape his forces for the war ahead. Working alongside Director of Football Txiki Begiristain and CEO Ferran Soriano, the Catalan succeeded in securing a number of crucial new signings while also agreeing to offload some major names.

Among those earmarked for departure was fleet-footed winger and four-time Premier League winner Raheem Sterling, deemed surplus to requirements despite scoring 17 goals and providing nine assists in 47 appearances the season before. It would be Chelsea who would swoop for the England international to the tune of £47.5 million. Sterling would be followed to London by former teammates Oleksandr Zinchenko and Gabriel Jesus, the pair signing for Arsenal in deals worth £30 million and £45 million respectively.

Clockwise from top left
First of many: Haaland celebrates his first competitive City goal; Foden breaches the United defence during a 6-3 thrashing; Alvarez starts the fightback at home to Spurs; Pep and KDB exchange a few words; Arteta's young guns pushed City all the way in the league

Few clubs would countenance so many high-calibre departures in a season, let alone a single window, but there was little fear that City were blunting their offensive capabilities thanks to the arrival of the most coveted young striker on Earth. Announced as early as 10 May 2022, the purchase of Erling Haaland for a meagre £51.2 million from Borussia Dortmund added a razor-sharp spearhead to a perfectly drilled machine.

Supplemented further by the recruitment of Kalvin Phillips, Manuel Akanji, Stefan Ortega and soon-to-be World Cup winner Julián Álvarez (for whom a deal was agreed in January 2022), City were in the rudest of health as they marched out at a tumultuous Wembley Stadium on 30 July in their Community Shield clash against FA and League Cup winners Liverpool.

Billed as a clash between Haaland and Liverpool's new front man Darwin Núñez, the match finished 3-1 in favour of the Merseysiders, an eager Núñez scoring a stooping header to round off an impressive performance. However, anyone assuming the result was a portent of things to come was soon disabused of the notion. Wembley had witnessed a skirmish, but the real battles still lay ahead.

WRATH OF THE NORTHMAN

Bidding to become only the second team to win three Premier League titles in a row, City started their domestic campaign in ruthless fashion. Ridiculed for an uncharacteristically lacklustre display the week before, Haaland required just 36 minutes to find the net against West Ham, coolly slotting home from the spot to open his competitive City account. He would add a second just after the hour mark, sweeping a perfectly weighted Kevin De Bruyne through ball past Areola in the Hammers goal.

The blue touch paper had been lit. An assist a week later in a 4-0 home drubbing of Bournemouth and a close-range strike at St James' Park in a thrilling 3-3 draw with Newcastle maintained the Norwegian's momentum, but few could have foretold what he was building up to: nothing less than becoming the first player in the Premier League to score three successive home hat-tricks, the sweetest inflicted on a stricken Man United in a 6-3 evisceration of City's cross-city rivals on 2 October.

Prior to that hazy Etihad afternoon Guardiola's charges had already placed one boot in the Champions League knockout stages courtesy of victories against Sevilla and Dortmund, the latter secured via an acrobatic Haaland volley. City were purring, and even the sting of a 1-0 loss at Anfield in gameweek 10 of the new season didn't knock them off their stride.

A trio of (admittedly tight) league wins and further measured showings in Europe (including a 5-0 thrashing of FC Copenhagen) lifted City into 2nd place in the league



Images Alamy, Getty Images



and safely through to the business end of the Champions League prior to the hiatus of the World Cup in Qatar. Even so, the league holders were not enjoying everything their own way. To the surprise of virtually everyone outside of the Emirates Stadium, Arsenal were maintaining a sustained bid to rival City at the summit, and a 2-1 home reversal at the hands of a superb Brentford prior to the international break provided a sharp reminder that the reigning champions faced a fight.

A SEASON OF TWO HALVES

The Citizens' quest for silverware resumed on 22 December, just four days after arguably the finest World Cup final in history ended with a Lionel Messi-inspired Argentina defeating holders France on penalties following a stunning 3-3 draw. The first challenge that lay in wait was Liverpool in the League Cup Round of 16. Having beaten Chelsea 1-0 in the 3rd Round, City were once more victorious in a competition they routinely dominate.

Few eyebrows were raised when Haaland opened the scoring with a superbly improvised volley, but Liverpool soon restored parity through Portugal's Fábio Carvalho. They then repeated the feat shortly after half time, Salah stabbing home from a Núñez cutback to level the scores at 2-2 after Mahrez's sweetly taken finish had temporarily restored City's lead. A see-saw contest was eventually settled just shy of the hour mark by a towering Nathan Aké header.

Displaying no signs of post-World Cup fatigue, City continued to motor, brushing Chelsea aside in both the league and FA Cup, the latter a 4-0 thumping. And then that strangest of things happened: City lost, and not to a title rival or a European giant but to a spirited Southampton, who belied their status as relegation candidates to knock Guardiola's men out of the League Cup.

Worse was to come at Old Trafford three days later. Embarrassed by their 6-3 hammering at the Etihad earlier in the season, Erik ten Hag's Man United strode out at the Theatre of Dreams with more than a point to prove. Refusing to fold as they had in October, the Red Devils rallied after Grealish's fine header from a Kevin De Bruyne cross to turn the game on its head, albeit thanks in no small part to a controversial Bruno Fernandes equaliser, the Portugal midfielder's curling effort initially ruled out due to Rashford clearly being in an offside position only for the officials to then rule that the England forward hadn't in fact interfered with play. Rashford then completed the turnaround with a close-range finish. It would be the only time all season that City contrived to lose from a winning position and enabled Arsenal to capitalise, the Gunners stretching their lead at the top of the table to eight points after defeating rivals Spurs.

Never ones to permit a loss to impact them beyond the final whistle, City responded to their derby defeat with a string of crucial wins, the most important being a 3-1 blitz at the Emirates that elevated them to the top of the table.

In line with their league exploits, City's efforts in the cup and on the continent continued to bear fruit, with Arsenal, Bristol City and Burnley respectively cuffed aside and Leipzig punished for having the audacity to hold City to a draw in Germany by a vengeful Haaland. Any hopes of an upset were shredded by the interval as City's number 9 ran in a hat-trick before emerging for the second half to add a brace in what would be a 7-0 shellacking of Marco Rose's outfit. The match was also notable for Guardiola's deployment of John Stones in midfield. The Yorkshireman enjoyed an imperious game in which he didn't misplace a single pass and greatly enhanced both his side's pressing and defensive stability. He would continue to flourish in his new hybrid role in the weeks to come.

> "AS WAS NOW BECOMING THE NORM, CITY DISHED OUT FURTHER BEATINGS"

As was now becoming the norm, City dished out further beatings to Liverpool and Southampton (both games ended 4-1) to maintain the pressure on leaders Arsenal. Without breaking stride they inflicted the same scoreline (on aggregate) on Thomas Tuchel's Bayern Munich. No matter the opposition, City suffocated them all.

TURNING THE SCREW

Assured of their place in the FA Cup final (thanks to a Riyad Mahrez hat-trick in the semi-final against a valiant Sheffield United, the first scored at that stage of the competition since 1958) and the Champions League semi-final, in late April the Sky Blues prepared for ▸



a pivotal clash hyped by pundits and broadcasters alike as a title decider. In truth, City hosting Arsenal required no additional fanfare: Mikel Arteta, Guardiola's former apprentice, knew only too well what the ramifications of defeat would be. Unfortunately for the Gunner's boss, forewarned was not forearmed.

As so often is the case when City need a totemic performance, Kevin De Bruyne was utterly imperious on the night, surging relentlessly at a faltering Arsenal back line unable to fathom a way to stop him. The Belgian opened the scoring on seven minutes with a crisp low finish from the edge of the box, then whipped a pinpoint cross onto the head of John Stones, the Barnsley Beckenbauer steering a header beyond the reach of Aaron Ramsdale to double the lead. A beautifully placed finish from De Bruyne on 54 minutes extinguished any hopes of an Arsenal fightback, Rob Holding's late goal nothing more than a consolation. Into stoppage time and it was the turn of Haaland, hair flowing untamed, to deliver the coup de grace.

Watching the blue-clad Norwegian cleave the Arsenal defence in two like a Viking with an axe to grind, the sense that the destination of the title was shifting irreversibly towards Manchester was inescapable. The Londoners still clung to top spot, but only by two points and having played two more games, and nobody does winning runs like City.

Fulham, West Ham (recipients of Haaland's record-breaking 36th league goal of the season) and Leeds fell beneath the tracks of the blue machine in the coming weeks to move City four clear at the top. Lifting a fifth Premier League title in six seasons morphed from a fading hope into an inevitability. However, the quest to clinch the biggest prize of all presented a formidable obstacle in early May – Carlo Ancelotti's wily Real Madrid.

"DE BRUYNE WAS IMPERIOUS ON THE NIGHT, SURGING RELENTLESSLY AT A FALTERING ARSENAL BACK LINE"

DEATH BY A THOUSAND PRESSES

There comes a stage in the process of moulding a great team when everything clicks into place; that single searing moment when Fate holds up her hands, concedes that nothing more can be done and steps aside. For Man City, that moment arrived on a cool spring night at an expectant Etihad Stadium against their nemesis from the previous season's European campaign. Real Madrid, clad in black and boasting a record 14 European Cups, harboured hopes of crushing the pretenders to their throne and once more defending their crown. The first leg in Madrid had been a hard-fought affair that culminated in a 1-1 draw, the sides evenly matched. But all empires must fall, and within 22 minutes of the return leg the house that Ancelotti built started to collapse in the face of a merciless blue tide.

Harassing the Real players like a pack of devils, City's irresistible pressing game unhinged the holder's game plan at the off, and after 20 minutes of toying with their bamboozled victims they delivered their first killer blow. Working the ball out to the right flank, Kyle Walker found De Bruyne loitering on the edge of the Real box. The red-headed regista killed Walker's pass with one touch and then threaded Silva in behind the Los Blancos defence with his second. Afforded the freedom of Manchester by a flummoxed host of black shirts, Silva picked his spot and smashed the ball beyond a despairing Thibaut Courtois to spark total bedlam.

Encamped in the Real half, City continued to squeeze the life out of Ancelotti's panicked players, who mustered a meagre ten passes in their tormentor's half during the first 45 minutes. By the interval any hopes Real had of mounting a fightback were hyperventilating in the away dressing room, a second Silva goal on 36 minutes – this time a deft









Clockwise from top left Haaland makes it 4-1 against Arsenal; Gündoğan kisses the Premier League trophy; the German was then the hero at Wembley in the cup final; Silva relishes finding the net in that famous 4-0 drubbing of Real Madrid; City fans pay homage to their team's third successive title triumph; Real's dejected players leave the pitch; Haaland poses proudly with his Golden Boot trophy; Kyle Walker played his way back into contention after falling out of favour

looping header from a Gündoğan rebound – putting the home side beyond reach. Late goals from Manuel Akanji (via a heavy Éder Militão deflection) and the ever-impressive Julián Álvarez (the Argentine netting his third Champions League strike to cap off a season in which he scored 17 goals in all competitions and assisted on four occasions) simply reinforced City's total dominance.

Sixteen shots to Real's seven. Sixty per cent possession. A gulf of 197 passes. An incredible 196 touches in the attacking third in the first half alone. By every metric Guardiola's side obliterated the visitors en route to booking their second European final of the Catalan's reign. Speaking to the press shortly after the finest performance by an English side in European footballing history, Guardiola explained that his men had been spurred to victory by the pain of their semi-final defeat to Real the year before. He then hailed everyone involved with the club on a night that will forever live in its memory.

"I'm very pleased for the whole organisation. For the chairman, owner, especially the players, and all the staff behind. We accepted the defeat, and today we were there. One year later we are in the final of the Champions League."

Scene of the greatest Champions League final of the 21st century, the Atatürk Stadium beckoned, but before City could lock horns with Inter Milan there was the small matter of wrapping up the league and contesting a first-ever all-Manchester FA Cup final.





MAKE THAT A DOUBLE

Sun Tzu, the famed Chinese god of war, once said that winning without fighting is the best outcome, and that is precisely how City ultimately clinched their fifth league title under Guardiola.

After surrendering top spot in the wake of three costly draws and that devastating defeat at the Etihad, by early May Arsenal knew it would take a Devon Loch-style collapse from Guardiola's side to give the North Londoners any hope of a title victory. To their credit they bounced back with a crucial 3-1 home win against Chelsea followed by an impressive 2-0 victory at the home of Champions League hopefuls Newcastle to keep the race alive until the middle of the final month of the season. But any lingering dreams of a red-ribboned Premier League trophy were gravely undermined by a superb Brighton, Roberto De Zerbi's electric Seagulls romping to a 3-0 away win at the Emirates that left their hosts slumped on the turf.



Calculating permutations and probabilities is a key part of football, but for the Arsenal fans travelling to Nottingham Forest's City Ground on the afternoon of 20 May the maths was simple – lose and Man City would be champions. Unfortunately for Arsenal loyalists and neutrals everywhere, Arteta's men did just that, falling to an early Taiwo Awoniyi strike. Yet there was to be no shame found in faltering on the final straight. The fact that Arteta's young side were still in contention in those last few weeks is a testament to both his management and the tenacity of a young side that will surely come again.

Delighted at not only retaining the league title but being afforded the opportunity to rotate his squad for the final three games, Guardiola named a much-changed side at home to Chelsea the next day. Unsurprisingly, City didn't really get out of second gear in a narrow 1-0 win, and they would fail to fully rev their engines in their final two league games – a 1-1 draw away to Brighton and a 1-0 defeat to Brentford, the Bees becoming the only side to do the double over City all season. Their powder kept dry by their meticulous manager, City could approach the most seismic week in the club's history with all guns blazing.

Despite the confident predictions by many pundits that City would annihilate their neighbours in the FA Cup final, in truth the game would be a tight affair. Fittingly for a side used to breaking records, İlkay Gündoğan, looking ever more like an affable pirate than a midfield maestro, crashed home an exquisite volley after just 13 seconds, the fastest goal in an FA Cup final and a stunning blow to Ten Hag's game plan.

Wembley held its collective breath in anticipation of an onslaught, but United remained calm and worked their way slowly back into the contest. Just after the half-hour mark they were handed an ▸

Images Manchester City/Getty Images, Alamy, Getty Images





Clockwise from top left Two down, one to go: City enjoy their FA win; Rodri settles the Champions League final; I'm all right, Jack; Grealish embraces the chaos; Dias and Ederson lift Ol' Big Ears; A club of two: Sir Alex Ferguson embraces the only other man to lead an English club to the treble

opportunity to restore parity courtesy of an extremely harsh decision against Jack Grealish. Leaping to contest a header on the edge of the City box with Aaron Wan-Bissaka, the former Villa skipper was remarkably adjudged to have handled the ball when the United defender's header struck his hand from point-blank range. Grealish's understandable protests were quickly brushed aside and up stepped Bruno Fernandes to draw United level.

Both sides would create chances throughout, but it would only require one more goal to settle the matter, and it arrived on 51 minutes. Glancing up from the right wing as he prepared to bend a free kick into a congested area, De Bruyne spotted Gündoğan hovering on the edge, safely removed from the jostling shirts crowding around De Gea. The Belgian promptly lofted the ball out to his German colleague, who lashed a bouncing left-foot volley through a forest of legs and beyond the flailing gloves of the United keeper to win City their second FA Cup in five seasons. But for all the celebrations at the final whistle, the sense of something greater hung over the famous Wembley arch. Something that had only ever been achieved by an English club once before.

"To win the FA Cup the emotions are really special," said a tearful Guardiola when interviewed shortly after the game. "Now is the first time I can talk about the treble... It is one game away."

The treble. Its very mention evoking a host of mixed emotions, a dream that for so long had been out of view, a distant mission to be accepted if City made it that far. Now they stood on the verge of emulating the greatest achievement in the history of English football, with the added incentive (as if it were needed) of standing shoulder to shoulder with Sir Alex Ferguson's great 1999 side.

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

Every team cherishes a certain memory, be it a single moment in time, a particular match or perhaps an entire season, and some among them are fortunate enough to recall the night they seized the biggest prize of all. Liverpool's fanbase can look back fondly on six different occasions, but few would argue that 2005 stands unequalled for sheer drama. The same can be said for Man United, who will always have that incredible turnaround in the Nou Camp in '99. Chelsea, too, can gaze back to that Drogba-inspired victory in Munich in 2012. Would 10 June 2023 become synonymous with glory for Man City?

Viewing that night today in the rear-view mirror, its dimensions distorted by hindsight, it's easy to succumb to the idea that winning the treble in Istanbul was inevitable. After all, solid as Inter were defensively, could they really hope to break the City carousel? As it transpired, they indeed came agonisingly close to jamming a fatal spanner into the blue cogs whirring around them.

Daring to play City at their own game by pressing high, Inter successfully disrupted their opponent's rhythm, and when De Bruyne's hamstring snapped after just 35 minutes, forcing the Belgian to retreat to the dugout for the second successive Champions League final of his career, many of the travelling sky-blue host must have feared that it wasn't to be their night. Lucky for them then that a marauding Spaniard had other ideas.

The game was 68 minutes old when Phil Foden found Akanji roaming forward into the Inter half. The Swiss international looked up to see Bernardo Silva ghosting in behind the blue-and-black defenders and found him with an expertly weighted pass. One glance and Silva cut the ball back across goal, striking Francesco Acerbi. Amid a hail of protests for handball one man kept his focus. Presented with a slither of white to aim at, Rodri galloped into the box and curled an unstoppable shot beyond André Onana to give City the lead. Dropped in Porto in 2021 as City fell to a shock 1-0 defeat to Chelsea, Rodri had fearlessly seized his moment.



"FALLING TO THEIR KNEES, CITY'S PLAYERS HEAVED WITH A MIX OF PRIDE AND RELIEF"

Apparently storing up a few scares for this particular match, the footballing gods made every watching City fan suffer for the remaining 25 minutes as Inter missed not one but two massive opportunities to score, the best chance falling to former Man United striker Lukaku from all of a yard out. Somehow the Belgian international managed to direct his header against Ederson's knee and City were spared. The Brazilian would be summoned into action again in the final seconds of stoppage time, City's cat-like number one punching a Robin Gosens' header out to safety as referee Szymon Marciniak put the whistle to his lips.

"They've done it! They've done it! Manchester City have done it!" bellowed Darren Fletcher from the commentary box. It wasn't quite Clive Tyldesley circa 1999, but nobody in blue cared. Falling to their knees, tears streaming down their cheeks, City's players heaved with a mixture of pride and relief. They'd done it all right, and nobody was more grateful than Guardiola.

"This trophy is so difficult to win," he sighed when speaking to the BT Sport's commentary team, winner's medal draped around his neck. "It was written in the stars that this season belonged to us."

THE ETIHAD EMPIRE

It is said that upon realising that there was nowhere left to conquer, Alexander the Great openly wept, a sentiment Guardiola shared in 2009 in the wake of his breathtaking Barcelona side clinching the Club World Cup to secure all six trophies available to them in a single season. Finally able to release the tension that had consumed him throughout his first season in the Barça dugout, he sobbed and wondered aloud what more they could possibly achieve. It is tempting to ask the same question of his now immortal Citizens.

Will securing the treble fuel their desire for further silverware, especially with the Club World Cup looming this December? Is the prize of aiming for an unprecedented quadruple next season enough to drive this blue juggernaut onwards? Or, with a new trophy cabinet required, will this season satiate the hunger that boils inside the likes of Ederson, Kyle Walker and Kevin De Bruyne, players who've won it all? And what of Erling Haaland, record breaker, golden boot winner and treble champion in his debut season in England? It's hard to picture the lack of a League Cup medal keeping the Norwegian awake at night, nor perhaps out of the clutches of Real Madrid should they come knocking.

Whatever awaits City and their Catalan conductor in the season ahead, it is sure to be an intriguing watch, one no doubt filled with scintillating displays of pressing play, plenty of elaborate team goals and no shortage of ticker tape. One thing is for certain – Guardiola will not permit any of his men to rest on their laurels, subconsciously or otherwise, and as long as he remains at the helm it is difficult to identify a team in the world that could derail them. Already the winner of 12 major trophies as City manager, Guardiola is as close to a guarantee of success as it's possible to get in football, and there are no indications that he is about to depart the Etihad and take what would be a very well-earned sabbatical. In fact he has reiterated his desire to see out the remaining two years on his current deal, and there is every chance he will decide to extend his stay beyond it.

There are always more records to break, milestones to reach and then watch as they slip beneath the horizon. The Blue Moon is ascendant, but beyond it lurks a new dawn and with it fresh challenges. It will take more than a second career treble to stop Guardiola from facing them all.

"Next season we will start from zero," smiled the City manager as the Atatürk emptied to the sound of singing Mancunians. He is the epitome of a winner, one now in control of a history-making team that is never satisfied. That thought alone should terrify the rest of Europe. The future is bright, and it's bathed in blue.



Images Getty Images



All four one: Phil Foden, City's player of the year, hoists the Premier League title into the Manchester sky during the open-top bus parade held to celebrate a record fourth title in a row

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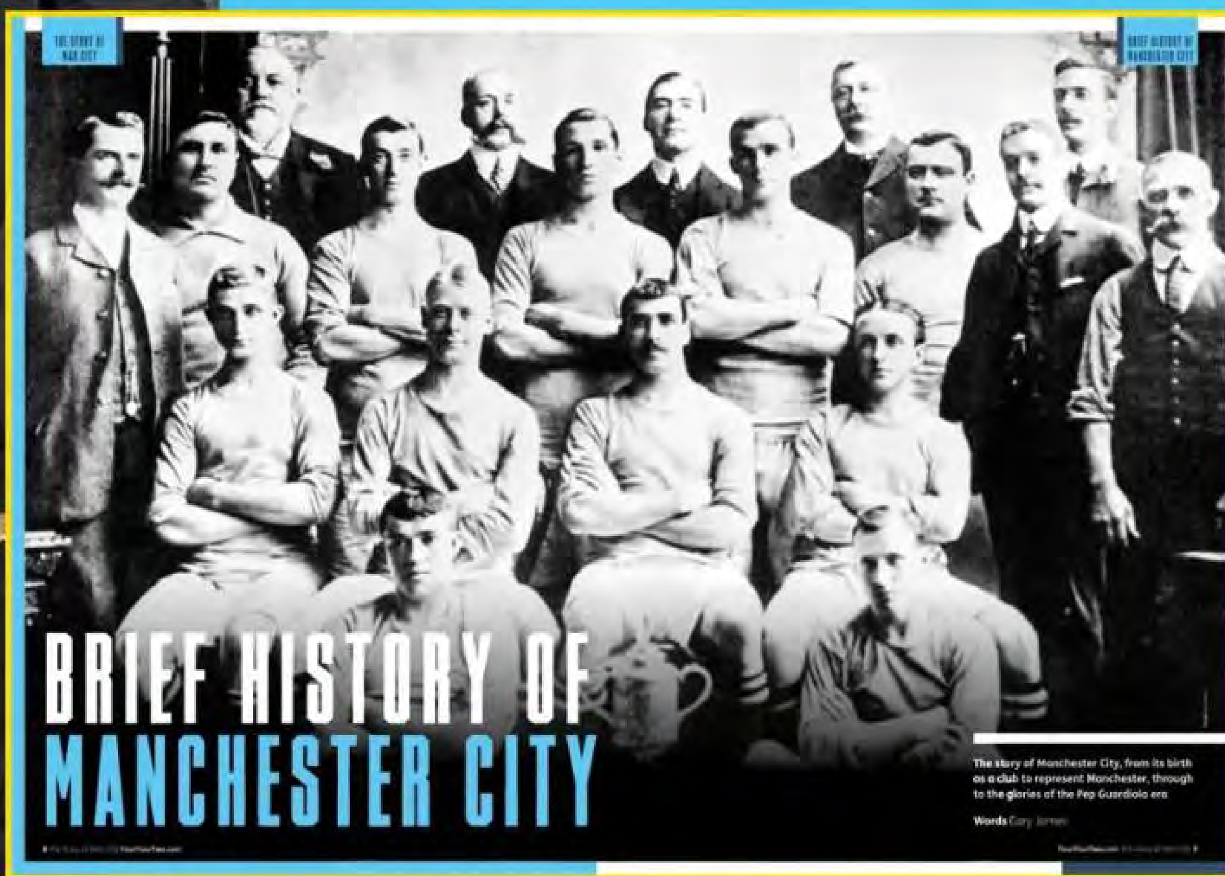


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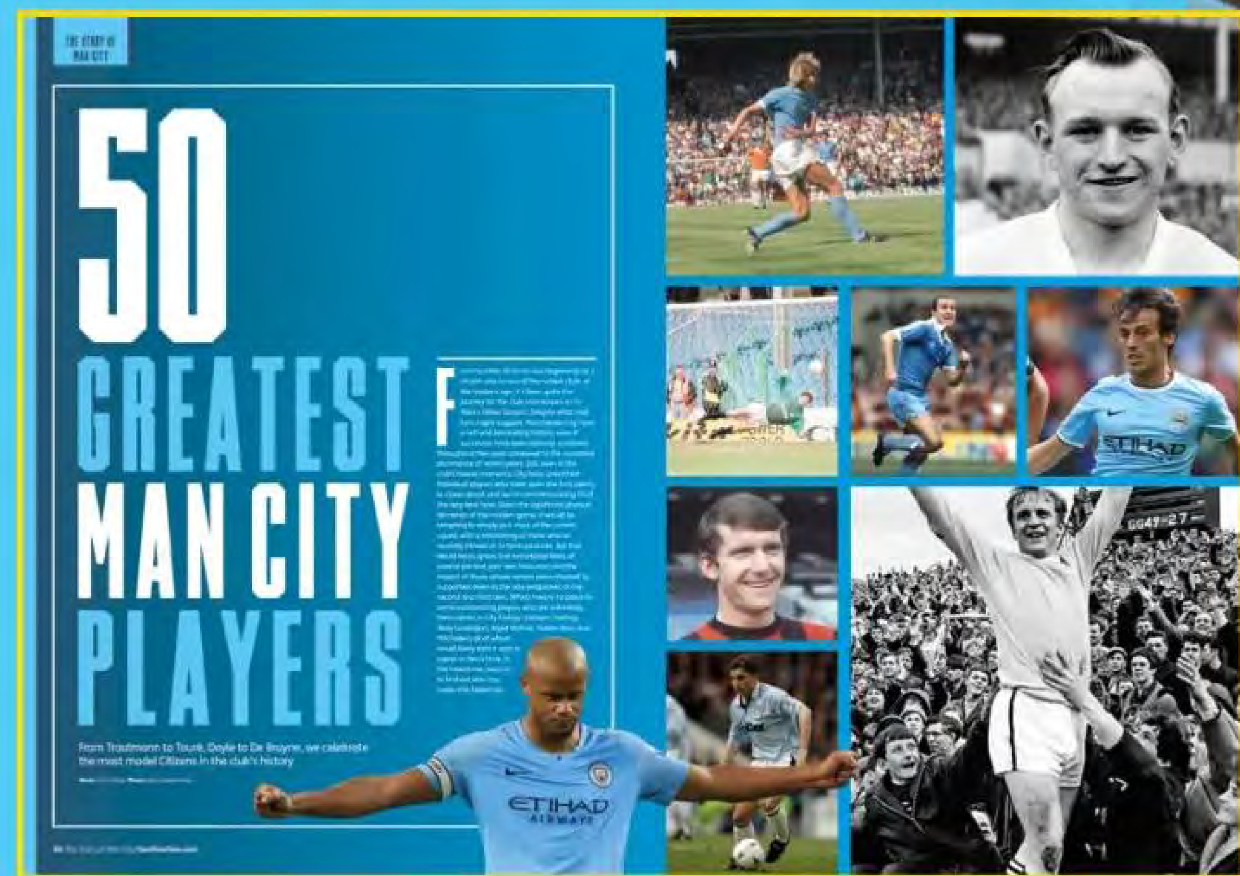
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